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**The Intimate Pulse of Reality:
Sciences of Description in Fiction and Philosophy, 1870-1920**

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Dissertation

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This dissertation tracks a series of literary interventions into scientific debates of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, showing how the realist novel generated new techniques of description in response to pressing philosophical problems about agency, materiality, and embodiment. In close conversation with developments in the sciences, writers such as George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, and Olive Schreiner portrayed human agency as contiguous with rather than opposed to the pulsations of the physical world. The human, for these authors, was not a privileged or even an autonomous entity but a node in a web of interactive and co-constitutive materialities. Focused on works of English fiction published between 1870-1920, I argue that the historical convergence of a British materialist science and a vitalistic Continental natural philosophy led to the rise of a *dynamic realism* attentive to material forces productive of “character.” Through the literary figure of character and the novelistic practice of description, I show, turn-of-the-century realists explored what it meant to be an embodied subject, how qualities in organisms emerge and develop, and the relationship between nature and culture more broadly.

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INTRODUCTION

During the final years of the nineteenth century realism began to peel away from the novel form. The death of the triple-decker novel in 1894 led to the development of more experimental formats as well as the resurgence of non-narrative genres like the character sketch. Turning away from the linearity of plot toward the diffuse and cyclical temporality of description, late Victorian realists distanced themselves from the conventions of mid-Victorian popular fiction.¹ Realism, George Gissing wrote in 1895, “contrasts with the habit of mind which assumes that a novel is written ‘to please people,’ ... that the book must have a ‘plot’” (“The Place of Realism” 85). This shift coincided with a desire to highlight the sensual elements of embodied experience. Less interested in narrating human action and intention than rendering sensible the textures and densities of the physical world, late Victorian novelists took up with renewed enthusiasm the realist project of description.²

This dissertation explores the reinvention of realism at the turn of the twentieth century, showing how the novel generated new techniques of description in response to pressing philosophical problems of agency, materiality, and embodiment. Tracing the rise of a “New Realism” between the years of 1870 and 1920, I approach realism less in terms of its desire to represent the world accurately or objectively than in terms of its endeavor to claim a fundamental stratum of ontology for literature at a time when the real was increasingly perceived to be the province of the sciences. By the 1870s a progressively restricted and professionalized scientific culture had staked its claim upon a real defined

¹ See Garcha (219–240) on the anti-populist sentiment of post-1870 avant-garde plotless fiction.

² Jameson has suggested realism emerges out of a dialectic between “pure storytelling” and the “impulses of scenic elaboration, description, and above all affective investment”—the affective impulse held always in check by the structuring force of *récit* (*Antinomies* 11). Realism at the turn of the century, I am arguing, increasingly sought to disrupt this synthesis, wading out into the murky territory of description, impulse, and affect.

in materialist terms, and literature had come to assert more cultural authority. Culture, Matthew Arnold wrote in 1869, “moves by the force, not merely or primarily of the scientific passion for pure knowledge, but also of the moral and social passion for doing good” (6: 7). More than the scientific endeavor “to see things as they are” (6: 7), literature, he argued elsewhere, was best positioned to answer the “question: How to live” (4: 105). Turn-of-the-century realists spurned the Arnoldian suggestion that the sciences investigated nature and literature, culture. Refusing to accede investigation of the nature of reality to the scientist or natural philosopher, they used literature to explore what it meant to be a materially constituted subject, how qualities in organisms emerge and develop, and the relationship between nature and culture more broadly. The literary figured they used to do so was character. The central claim of *The Intimate Pulse of Reality* is that a post-Darwinian notion of the human as a material creature, combined with an increased awareness of *matter itself* as a fundamentally dynamistic and open-ended process, produced new ways of understanding of human character. These new understandings of character, in turn, have implications for how we understand not only the history of English literature but the history of science—both of which would benefit from a more robust conception of how novelists used literature to explore the relation between materiality and subjectivity.

Focused on a series of little studied, late-career works written by George Eliot, Thomas Hardy, Olive Schreiner, and other New Realists of the 1880s and 90s, this project fills a major gap on scholarship on the English novel, which has tended to overlook this rich period of realist composition. Where others highlight the turn away from realism in movements like aestheticism and decadence,³ I trace the continued

³ See for instance Dowling, Showalter, and Schaffer. Other work on the English has explored the revival the Gothic (Grimes) and popular fiction on the occult (McCann).

evolution of the realist novel throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, showing how realist aesthetics transformed to take on new forms and cultural roles. When research has been conducted on late Victorian realism, it has tended to focus solely on a single genre or author (e.g. the New Woman novel, Hardy, Gissing) or on a particular social or political issue (e.g. class relations, sexuality, censorship).⁴ Drawing attention to the broader aesthetic and philosophical innovations of the realist novel as it transformed in the hands of some of its most foundational practitioners, I produce a much fuller picture of realism between the years of 1870 and 1920. I use the term “New Realism” broadly throughout to refer to the wide-scale reinvention of realism at the turn of the twentieth century, and I place the genre of the New Woman novel at the center of this movement. While some might distinguish between the New Realism (an aesthetic traditionally associated with male writers such as George Gissing and George Moore) and the New Woman novel (a genre originating with female authors like Olive Schreiner, George Egerton, and Mona Caird), I take cues from Molly Youngkin in resisting this gendered bifurcation.⁵ Building upon the work of Youngkin and other scholars of *fin-de-siècle* feminist fiction, I highlight the important role of women and feminist authors not only in reinventing realism at the turn of the century but in paving the way for the emergence of modernism.⁶ Showing how the descriptive innovations of Eliot, Hardy, and Schreiner prefigure and, in some cases, directly inform the materialist conceptions of subjectivity found in Woolf, Stein, and Proust, I deemphasize the “break” between realism and modernism, arguing that, in pushing realism to its aesthetic and philosophical

⁴ On class relations in the late Victorian novel see DeVine; on sexuality, see Richardson; on censorship see Patterson. On the New Woman novel see the following two notes.

⁵ As Youngkin astutely remarks, “pitting male and female novelists against each another creates a history of the novel that does not fully account for the way in which the feminist realist aesthetic and the woman’s press actually shaped modernism” (174–5). For more on the New Woman novel see Ledger, Ardis, and Heilmann.

⁶ See also Jane Eldridge Miller and Armstrong.

limits, late Victorian realists produced avant-garde proto-modernist forms that explored the fraught relation between materiality and subjectivity.

In addition to providing much-needed attention to the fate of realism at the *fin de siècle*, *The Intimate Pulse of Reality* contributes to the growing body of scholarship on late Victorian science and literature. Focusing on moments of epistemological intimacy and embodied knowledge in the realist novel, I challenge the critical portrait of realism as a practice of world- and self-mastery in which the body is considered an impediment to knowledge and in which revelation occurs through the negation of embodiment. Scholars of nineteenth-century literature and science have often drawn parallels between realist epistemology and what the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have called “moralization of objectivity” in the nineteenth century—the tendency of nineteenth-century scientists to equate objectivity with ideals of self-abnegation or self-restraint (“The Image” 81).⁷ As George Levine has argued, like Daston and Galison’s nineteenth-century scientists, Victorian realism expresses a “willingness to repress the aspiring, desiring, emotion-ridden self and everything merely personal, contingent, historical, material that might get in the way of acquiring knowledge” (2). Just as the nineteenth-century scientist attempts to erase every trace of the embodied perspective of the observer through self-imposed rules and automated processes, that is, the realist novelist aspires to produce transparent and objective descriptions of the world. Questioning the historical alignment of the realist novel with scientific ideals of objectivity, bodily abnegation, and self-restraint, I demonstrate how nineteenth- and twentieth-century realists appropriated scientific research on sensation and perception in order to *account for* rather than *erase* the role of the body on knowledge production. Consider as a brief example Hardy’s 1891 essay “The Science of Fiction,” which

⁷ See especially Levine, *Dying* (171-199) and Garratt (27-37).

denounces the aspiration of “scientific realists” to the ideal of objectivity. Emphasizing the impossibility of eliminating “discriminative choice” and “pleasure” in “telling a tale,” Hardy identifies a contradiction in the attempts of writers like Zola to excise the body and emotion from their literary practice. While the “most devoted apostle of realism, the naturalist” might “subscribe to rules,” Hardy contends, he cannot but “work by instinct.” In so doing, the literary naturalist “maintain[s] in theory what he abandons in practice,” defining his “impartiality as a passion, and plan as a caprice” (101-2).

In “The Science of Fiction” Hardy imagines a literary practice *attuned* rather than averse to the impulses of the body. Distinguishing his own form of realism from that of “the author of *Germinal* and *La Faute de l'Abbé Mouret*,” he calls for a realism driven by the “power of observation informed by a living heart” (104). The true “scientist of fiction,” Hardy suggests, does not aspire to transcend his embodied perspective; he works to account for “our widened knowledge of the universe and its forces, and man’s position therein” (101-2). Hardy’s critique of literary naturalism in “The Science of Fiction” renders salient the distinction this dissertation makes between the aims and ambitions of the turn-of-the-century English realists and those of their French naturalist contemporaries.⁸ Where naturalists like Zola recommended “the *application* of the experimental method to the novel,” realists like Hardy argued “against such conformation of story-writing to scientific processes” (Zola, “The Experimental Novel” 104, emphasis mine; Hardy, “The Science of Fiction” 102). Instead, they attempted to develop a “science of fiction” with its own—uniquely literary—aims and logic. Grounded in “the

⁸ On the difference between realism and naturalism see also Arata, who argues that the term “naturalism” is by and large inappropriate to the context of late Victorian fiction. In the case of England, he writes, “it is more accurate to talk about the ‘New Realism’ or the ‘New Fiction’ than about Naturalism, a term applied usually only to certain kinds of fiction produced on the Continent and in the United States. English novelists such as George Gissing, Thomas Hardy, George Moore and Arthur Morrison are occasionally labeled Naturalists by twentieth-century critics, but in fact all English writers over the period (except Moore, briefly) distanced themselves from the Naturalist movement.” (“Realism” 186n5). Such distancing is no more apparent than in the case of Hardy’s essay.

fruits of closest observation,” Hardy argues, literature elucidates the “vital qualities” of things. As such, he explains, “[t]he particulars of this science are the generals of almost all others. Its materials being human nature and circumstances, the science thereof might be dignified by calling it the codified law of things as they really are.” Literature, in other words, does not *take cues from* science; it is itself a science. “In no proper sense can the term ‘science’ be applied other than in this fundamental manner” (101-3).

Importantly then, rather than tracing the *influence* of science on the development of the novel, *The Intimate Pulse of Reality* sets out to explore the ways that novel cultivated its own insights into physical and metaphysical problems. Scholars of Victorian literature and science have long emphasized the role of scientific thought in shaping realist narrative. From Gillian Beer’s foundational study *Darwin’s Plots* (1983) to Tabitha Sparks’ more recent *The Doctor in the Victorian Novel* (2009), critics of Victorian literature and science have traced the effect of scientific theory on literary forms and figures (3). Where Beer shows how Darwin’s understanding of species as an “inextricable web of affinities” transformed the structure of the Victorian multi-plot novel (Darwin, *Origin* 424), Sparks reveals how “modern material and physiological knowledge ... enters and shapes the novel’s most sustained exercise in fancy, the marriage plot” (3).⁹ Differently from these scholars, who look to *plot* as the place where scientific paradigms shifts are registered, I look to *description* as the place where turn-of-the-century realists developed their own mode of ontological inquiry. Shifting the critical discourse from questions of scientific influence to questions of literary intervention, I suggest that description performs its own kind of literary-theoretical work.

⁹ As another example, consider Sally Shuttleworth’s *George Eliot and Nineteenth-Century Science* (1984), which demonstrates how Eliot’s “involvement with science influenced the development of her fiction,” especially her “narrative structure” (ix-x).

In this way, my argument has implications for our understanding of realism well beyond the nineteenth century. Complicating the binary between realist representationalism and (post)modernist semiotics, I draw attention to a period of realist composition committed to theorizing—rather than taking for granted—the philosophical relationship between subject and object, observer and observed. The suggestion that realism, at its most fundamental level, consists in a naïve representationalism, I will suggest, speaks less to the ambitions of the realist novel to describe the world than it does about the guiding assumptions of literary theory as it came to define itself against realist aesthetics. That realism increasingly came to be understood to have a naïve understand of the relationship between signifier and signified, I argue here, was the result of a movement to “theorize” literature from a certain critical distance—to produce a “science” of literature focused on literature’s autonomous and autotelic structure: from New Criticism and semiotics to formalism and structuralism, these movements positioned themselves against realism and “its reductive claim to represent ‘the’ real world” (Habib 475). The historical narrative in which these twentieth-century “theories” of literature (which, more often than not, took the realist novel as their “object” of analysis) emerge in contradistinction to the descriptive naiveté of realism, however, is predicated on the elision of the period of highly theoretical realist aesthetics that this dissertation works to illuminate—a period that saw realist novelists creating their own “science of literature,” their own “theories” of description and representation. To what extent did realists themselves—in the very period leading up to the rise of semiotics—actually contribute to the theorization of their own descriptive practice? How do the insights of the highly self-reflective realist works of the *fin de siècle* complicate the caricature of realism as a naïve representationalism that dominates mid to late twentieth-century literary theory? In the following section, I address these larger theoretical questions before returning, in my

final section, to explore in greater depth the historically specific context of the late Victorian literature, philosophy, and science.

REALISM IN THEORY

The critical history of realism is a critical history of objects. “Why are there so many objects in the realist novel?” asks Harry Shaw in *Narrating Reality* (1999) (42). “Beginning with objects,” Shaw avers, “will involve us with problems of reference and ‘the referent’” (40). Objects, in other words, are things we point to, and the realist novel had long been understood to point. For Ian Watt in *The Rise of the Novel* (1957), the aim of the realist novelist was to “make the words bring his object home to us in all its concrete particularity” (29). But Watt’s thesis came under staunch criticism in the late twentieth century by post-structuralist theorists who called into question the capacity of language to transparently signify things: deconstructionists and psychoanalytic critics, Marxists and feminists—while they disagreed on much else—all seemed to agree: the realist novel did not purely and simply describe the world.¹⁰ For Barthes, famously, in “The Reality Effect” (1968) realism’s objects are integral to the production of the “effect” of reality: “Flaubert’s barometer, Michelet’s little door, say, in the last analysis, only this: *we are the real*,” he concludes his influential essay, arguing that although such notations might *seem* to denote reality, they in fact do nothing but connote it (16). The theory that realism’s objects served an ideological function would gain increased traction in the 80s and 90s with the rise of discourse theory and cultural studies. For D.A. Miller in *The Novel and the Police* (1988), the objects of the nineteenth-century novel are

¹⁰ In the deconstructive vein see J. Hillis Miller, *The Form of Victorian Fiction* (1968); in the psychoanalytic vein, Leo Bersani, *A Future for Astyanax* (1976); in the Marxist vein, Frederik Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981); in the feminist vein, Naomi Schor, *Breaking the Chain: Women, Theory and French Realist Fiction* (1985).

“sinister” and “unsettling” in the way that they “dramatize ... a power continually able to appropriate the most trivial detail” (28–9). While Miller explored the power of the Victorian novel function to discipline human subjects through the manipulation of symbolic objects, feminist critics showed how realist ideology worked to objectify and subjugate women. Arguing that realism draws “its momentum from representing bound women,” in *Breaking the Chain* (1985) Naomi Schor suggested that the novel harnesses the power of the female libido in and through its immobilization the female body (144). Whether a symbol of the novel’s ideological power or a tool for the production of its “*referential illusion*,” by the century’s end realism’s objects were understood to be nothing more than the products of human discourse.

I recite this truncated history of literary theory’s fascination with the dialectic of subject and object not because I think it unimportant to understand the ways that realist fiction institutes norms, produces culturally specific meanings, or interpellates subjects, but rather to point out how these twentieth-century critiques of realism turn upon the ontological distinction between human and nonhuman (coded as the epistemological distinction between subject and object). As the historian of literary theory M.A.R Habib explains, the “separation between the worlds of subject and object” was central to its rejection of realism as semiotically naïve in the twentieth century; “the difficulty of articulating the connection between these [the worlds of subject and object],” he writes, “indicated that certain profound philosophical problems had been sidestepped by realism in its reductive claim to represent ‘the’ real world” (475). But this problem, I want to suggest, has less to do with the realist novel than with the preoccupations and concerns of mid to late twentieth-century literary theory, which turns upon the assumption that human subjects—unique in their capacity for language—stand not merely epistemologically but ontologically apart from the world of things they describe. Such an assumption, I argue,

underpins the theory that although the realist novelist might describe discursively constructed things, he will never describe “the things themselves.” Consider here the case of Barthes, who argues that it is the capacity for *description itself* that ontologically distinguishes human from nonhuman. Description, he writes in “The Reality Effect,” “appears to be a characteristic of so-called higher languages, in that, seemingly paradoxically, it is not justified by any purpose of action or communication.” Invoking the research of the Austrian animal ethologist Karl von Frisch, Barthes interprets the scientist’s work on bee semiotics to demonstrate that while bees “might have a predictive system of dances, used in food-gathering, they possess nothing resembling a *description*” (emphasis in original). Although “bees might have a language,” that is, their communication system remains significantly less complex than that of human beings, who are able to craft phrases without specific goals or ends. That the bees are able to *narrate* but supposedly unable to *describe* (their dances are “predictive”) thus suggests to Barthes that “singularity of description” has something to do with the singularity of the human (12).

That Barthes goes to such great lengths to align description with the human speaks to his desire to demonstrate the true semantic complexity of description: while the realist novel might *appear* simply to describe the world, Barthes suggests, its operations are more sophisticated than it lets on. In turning a critical eye toward description, Barthes challenged the tendency of literary critics to ignore description or denigrate it as inferior to narration. Dismissing description as “mere filler in the novel” (110), “mere tableau” (11), or “mere background” (115), in his essay “Narrate or Describe?” (1936) György Lukács argued that description was inherently inferior to narration due to its tendency to privilege objects over subjects. Where Barthes’ essay aligns description with the subtlety and complexity of human subjectivity and narration with the unthinking motions of

nonhuman life, however, in Lukács the terms are reversed: it is narrative that is capable of capturing the uniqueness of the human, while description “debases characters to the level of inanimate objects,” alienating humans from their own humanity (133).¹¹ Beginning his essay with an extended comparison between Tolstoy and Zola, Lukács proposes that where Tolstoy’s narration of the horse-racing scene in *Anna Karenina* (1873-77) does justice to the “richly developed inner life” of characters as perceptive subjects, Zola’s description of a similar scene in *Nana* (1880) ignores the “constant change and variety of human experience,” presenting humans as unthinking animals (124). In describing his horse-racing scene, Zola places his characters on the same descriptive plane as the horses competing in the race: the victorious horse at Zola’s horse race, after all, is named Nana. Critical of this representational leveling between human and nonhuman, Lukács thus proclaims Tolstoy the superior writer and narration the superior literary technique.

Here again an ontological distinction between human and nonhuman structures the claim about what realist description is and is not capable of. For both Barthes and Lukács, importantly, description is something that humans *do*, not something that should be *done to* them. For Lukács, description renders humans static and thing-like, and, as a result, fails to reveal their truly dynamic nature. For Barthes, the “*referential illusion*” of realist prose, differently, is a failure of denotation that speaks to the special linguistic capacity of humans (16). In both cases, the line between human and nonhuman is drawn as a way of limiting who gets to *describe* and who gets to *be described*: whether von Frisch’s bees or Zola’s horse, Flaubert’s barometer or Michelet’s little door, these things

¹¹ Description for Lukács functions like labor under capitalism for Marx. According to Marx, “Labour not only produces commodities; it also produces itself and the workers as a commodity... The result is that man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions—eating, drinking, and procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment—while in his human functions, he is nothing more than animal” (*Economic* xxii).

are objects to the dynamic subjects who represent them. The suggestion that realism tries and fails to transparently represent reality, I have been arguing, rests upon the assumption that the (linguistically endowed) human is somehow ontologically distinct from the world he or she attempts to describe, and thus nonhuman “objects” can only be understood in terms of their relevance to human “subjects.”¹² This is precisely the framework that which turn-of-the-century realists sought to overturn by producing works that theorized the relationship between the human and the world as intimate and connected rather than distanced and alienated. Far from the most important observer, thinker or actor pitted against the static physical being of nonhuman objects of inquiry, the human, for the writers I analyze was one of many active materialities in a world comprised of various mutually sensing agents. Calling into question the ontological distinction between subject and object, human and nonhuman, turn-of-the-century realists place into question a host of assumptions central not only to realist novel as a historical form—but to the literary theory that would eventually come to define itself against it.

¹² A commitment to preserving the ontological distinction between human and nonhuman persists in more recent scholarship. According to Caroline Levine, for example, the realist novel’s vast swaths of objects—“from natural curiosities to expensive commodities, and everything in between: heirlooms, outfits, instruments, fetishes, furniture, gems, exotic species, foodstuffs, antiquities, and even limbs”—are not significant on their own; they are signs or symbols relating to the nineteenth-century novelist’s social world (93). As Levine writes, “novelists valued things as part of a dense description of the social world, understanding material objects as an integral part of lived experience. Indeed, objects can often capture social relations as well or better than subjects: they can circulate as commodities; they can be passed down through families; they can be lost, hidden, and stolen; they can be obstacles, instruments, or ends in themselves; their value can be emotional, economic, symbolic—or all of these.” (93) While Levine, in her own work, cultivates a formalist approach to the novel, her interpretation of realism’s objects captures the general sentiment of many twenty-first century critics, including a new generation of new historicists, who assume that the realist novel’s primary motivation for describing nonhuman objects is to invoke human meanings. See for instance, Jude Law, discussed in chapter two, whose book explores fluids as symbols of larger socio-cultural shifts. The most major reaction against this general trend has been “thing theory,” which emerges out of with Heidegger’s postulation that a thing becomes a thing when it stops working, stops being an instrument for the subject (see Brown). In the Victorian context see Freedgood, who follows Brown in attempted to think realism’s “things” as something other than objects “indentured to the subject” (12).

As I demonstrate through a series of readings of philosophically engaged realist works, such as Eliot's *Middlemarch* (1874) and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), Hardy's *The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament* (1897), and Schreiner's *From Man to Man; or Perhaps Only* (1927), the realist novelist was an intimately involved participant whose desire drove her descriptions. From Eliot's famous suggestion in *Middlemarch* that to understand all of human life "would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel's heart beat" (182) to Schreiner's depiction of the universe in *From Man to Man* as "a great, pulsating, always interacting whole," the writers I examine figured the relationship between the human and the world as an "intimate pulse," and they worked to re-attune that connection through literary description (180).¹³ In so doing, they came to understand description less as the attempt to represent the world from the perspective of a distanced or objective observer than to evoke a dynamic, material reality from the perspective of a body mutually implicated in that reality. Tracing the word "pulse" across George Eliot's corpus, Neil Hertz has interpreted the figure as "a small replicable unit of vitality," a "sign of life" that animates interaction, change, and movement (13). Attending to moments of pulsating vitality akin to those Hertz discovers in Eliot, my chapters track how the figure of the pulse crops up as a record of intimate relation, a mark of material connectedness between the novelist and the world she describes. From the perspective of the twentieth century, Habib argues, realism "was one expression of the 'scientific' tendency to analyze and divide up the various constituents of the world ... the reality [it] encaptured was expressed in great detail, but at the expense of being randomly isolated, literally cut out from its surroundings" (474-5). This portrait, while perhaps an accurate characterization of the

¹³ Similarly, in "The Science of Fiction" Hardy ends with a call for a descriptive practice that would reveal the "vital qualities" of all things, including the author, who should manifest a "power of observation informed by a living heart" (104).

mid-Victorian novel with its fascination with the localized instance and the commodity, could not be further afield for what concerns the webbed metaphysical vision of late nineteenth-century realism. Indeed, late Victorian realists like Schreiner used the novel to critique theories of the universe as “a thing of shreds and patches and unconnected parts,” imagining instead a world comprised instead by “internetting lines of action and reaction” (*From Man* 179-80). In drawing attention to little-studied works like Schreiner’s forgotten novel, *From Man to Man*, I reveal the extent to which turn-of-the-century realists exploited the affective power of description to *rethink reality itself* as a web of interactive and co-constitutive materialities.

In this way, rather than producing a new theory of realism, I approach realist description as its own kind of *theory*—but theory in the “weak” rather than the “strong” sense of the term. In a series of works drawing on the work of the American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, the literary critic Eve Sedgwick once elaborated the notion of “weak theory” as a linking together of affects attuned to the contingent, the near, and the local.¹⁴ According to Tomkins, the everyday life of the individual itself entails a kind of “theorizing” in that one is constantly scanning and amplifying one’s own affects in order to negotiate experience. Thus, for him, Sedgwick explains, “there is no distance at all between affect theory in the sense of the important explicit theorizing some scientists and philosophers do around affect, and affect theory in the sense of the largely tacit theorizing all people do in experiencing and trying to deal with their own and others’ affects” (“Paranoid” 134). In her influential essay “Paranoid Reading, Reparative Reading” (2003), Sedgwick spins Tomkins’ “weak theory” out into a theory of reading—one positioned against strong-theoretical or “paranoid” reading practices that account for the wide-ranging, the unseen, and the anticipated. In its place, Sedgwick proposes a

¹⁴ See especially Sedgwick, Frank, and Alexander, *Shame and Its Sisters* (1995).

reparative practice of *reading*, contending that the paranoid readers “have made it less rather than more possible to unpack the local, contingent relations between any given piece of knowledge and its narrative/epistemological entailments for the seeker, knower, or teller” (124). Quite differently, I excavate from within the realist novel a practice of reparative *writing*, a mode of describing the world attentive to what Sedgwick calls the “heartbeat of contingency” (147). The concept of weak theory, I suggest, opens up new possibilities for understanding the project of realism as it developed across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially as it sought to engage with descriptive and theoretical work in philosophy and science.

In Tomkins’ definition, strong theory entails “a highly organized way of interpreting information so that what is possibly relevant can be quickly abstracted and magnified and the rest discarded” (519). “To the extent to which [a] theory can account only for ‘near’ phenomena,” however, Tomkins explains, that theory “is a weak theory, little better than a description of the phenomena it purports to explain” (519). In Tomkins’ distinction between strong and weak theory we discover a curious analogue of Barthes’ distinction between narration and description: for Barthes, the reader will remember, narration is “predictive” and “schematic;” description, differently, “has no predictive aspect” and is instead “analogical” and “additive” (12). Not unlike strong theory, narrative is anticipatory, mapping out patterns and predicting future events. (Sedgwick herself aligns the paranoia of strong theory with the narratological, remarking that “paranoid knowing is so inescapably narrative” [138]). Description, on the other hand, looks something like weak theory—indeed, as Tomkins remarks, weak theory is “little better than a description.” (Echoing Barthes characterization of description as “additive,” moreover, Sedgwick describes the “reparative impulse” as “additive and accretive” [138].) Rereading Barthes through Sedgwick and Tomkins—as well as the

turn-of-the-century novel—helps us to see the critical potential of an approach to realism that would recognize its descriptions as a form of weak theory. Barthes was right to point out the importance of description for literary analysis; but where Barthes, in a strong-theoretical move, subsumes the descriptive detail into the totality of novelistic structure—“(and what would any method be worth which did not account for the whole of its object),” he interjects—I wonder what it would be like if we let some parts of the novel be weak (Barthes 11). To approach description as worthy of its own extended analysis—as essential on its own terms, rather than as an essential *part* of the novelistic structure—would mean to treat “the reality effect,” more straightforwardly, as an effect of reality, as the place where reality’s textures, surfaces, and forms are not only reflected but amplified.

In arguing that realism performs a kind of weak theory, an affective account of the low-level interweavings of the observable, the near, and the particular, I am suggesting that realist writing does something of what it says it does—describe reality. At the same time, I do not mean to suggest that literature (realist or otherwise) ever describes in a pure or unmediated way. While I might occasionally oppose description to plot or narrative, I am careful not to oppose description to connotation, signification, or other modes of meaning making. This is because, as I argue, description, for many realists, was less a desire to represent the world objectively or transparently than a way of tapping in—through language—to a shared materiality that links things, concepts, words, and persons. It was a weak-theoretical practice that aimed less to judge “the value of analytic objects or to somehow get their representation ‘right,’” as Kathleen Stewart writes, than to “wonder where they might go and what potential modes of knowing, relating, and

attending to things are already somehow present in them” (71).¹⁵ When I use the word “description,” therefore, I refer both to a literary practice and to a more general relation or stance toward the world, a basic desire to bring oneself closer to things by describing them. In this way, I think of realism less as an attempt to *point* at or *reference* reality than a desire to interact with and facilitate the experience of reality’s qualities and powers.¹⁶ And I explore the way in which literary description is able to isolate and thus in a sense “lift” the properties out of things, wrapping them into its own textual materiality. Description is never truly “minimal,” never transparent, but rather, as Barthes would say, “additive.”

Where Barthes, however, as I have already pointed out, aims to fully incorporate description into the signifiatory structure of the novel, I echo a host of scholars in thinking about the ways that description might actually succeed in reaching beyond the text.¹⁷ Especially influential for my thinking about how literary language interacts with the world has been Heather Love, who, inspired by the American sociologist Irving Goffman, advocates a model of textual analysis that would “rely on description rather than interpretation” (“Close But” 375). In a recent essay on the potential of the observation-based social sciences for the practice of close reading, Love describes the sentiment of what some have called the “speculative turn” of recent critical and literary

¹⁵ Stewart draws on Sedgwick’s notion of weak theory in order to explain how in her own ethnographic work she theorizes *through* description, letting “theory,” as she puts it, come “unstuck from its own line of thought to follow the objects it encounters” (72). See her *Ordinary Affects* (2007) and *A Space on the Side of the Road* (1996). Stewart has been especially influential for this project, as it is through courses with her on “The Ordinary” and “Affect” in my first year of graduate school, that I began to develop the theoretical perspective on realism that informs this project.

¹⁶ These observations about description emerged out of a series of conversations over the past two years with Ada Smailbegović. See Smailbegović’s poem “The Experiment Was This” (2013) for an elaboration of the descriptive practice I am discussing.

¹⁷ See for example the special issue of *Representations* entitled “Denotatively, Technically, Literally” (2014). In their introduction, the editors Elaine Freedgood and Cannon Schmitt propose a mode of reading that would open up “textuality to other- and nontextuality” (8).

theory: “If the legend of the 1970s and 1980s was Jacques Derrida’s claim that ‘*il n’y a pas de hors-texte*’ (there is nothing outside the text), we might take as representative of a more recent past Bruno Latour’s call to go ‘from metaphysics to ontology’ in order to ‘show what the real world is really like’” (“Close Reading” 402).¹⁸ Basing her approach on this injunction of Latour’s, Love argues for a mode of reading that “defers virtuosic interpretation in order to attempt to formulate an accurate account of what the text is *like*” (“Close Reading” 412). In so doing, her work uncovers the surprising ethical potential of seemingly “naïve and objectifying” empiricist practices long dismissed in humanities scholarship (430). Love’s notion of “descriptive reading” has implications for how we understand realism’s *descriptive writing*—likewise critiqued for its objectifying gaze (“Close But” 375). Where critics have long worried, to re-cite Lukács, that “description debases characters to the level of inanimate objects,” with Love’s posthumanist critique of humanist depths in mind, we might wonder whether a novel’s failure to reveal the “richly developed inner life” of its subjects is ultimately such a bad thing (133, 139). If, as Love argues, the ethical force of literature inheres not in its representation of depth and richness but rather in its ability to carefully document and describe “surfaces, operations, and interactions” then realism’s disrespect for the distinction between subject and object, human and nonhuman, might actually be an ethical mode of representation *because* refuses to grant the human a special ontological status, privileging a less anthropocentric view of life (“Close But” 375). In what follows, I attempt to think realism as something other than an ethically or semiotically specious attempt to represent the human in relationship to the nonhuman. Rather than lamenting that the realist novel so often fails to

¹⁸ See Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, *The Speculative Turn* (2011). I use this phrase because I think it captures the general sentiment of the recent turn toward the real and the material in critical theory and philosophy, not because I think the voices of this volume are especially representative of this larger trend. See note 23 for further references in this theoretical vein.

appropriately distinguish between subjects and objects, I ask what this failure makes possible for theory today.

DYNAMIC REALISM

Barthes once proposed that plot is structurally anthropomorphous in that its causal sequences grant “narrative privilege ... only to human relations.” The “art of description,” on the other hand, he contends, deemphasizes “the world of human interiority,” giving rise to “an implacable space which man can frequent only by movement” (“Literal” 51–3). Turning away from plot as the expression of human action and intention, late Victorian realists looked to description as a means of exploring the agential capacities of all life forms. The same year that Gissing published his remarks on plotlessness and realism, the character Eva Clough of W.S. Holnut’s *Olympia’s Journal* (1895) explained that if the novel “need not now-a-days depend on its plot” then “character” need not be defined in terms of the ability to self-consciously transform the self. Expanding the notion of character to include not only “man, woman, and child” but also “cat or dog,” Clough defines character in terms of the set of “complicated and often conflicting passions” that render any creature distinct. Contrasting the “rigidly determined characters” of the old realism with the “inconsistencies and marvelous surprises of human nature” of the new, she praises the ability of more recent novelists to render salient the “inconceivable number of original impulses” expressed by human and nonhuman subjects (Holnut 35–6). In *The Economy of Character* (1998) Deidre Lynch argues that in its genre-defining claim to provide the deepest, truest knowledge of character, the novel disassociated the stuff of character from the physical attributes of the body, driving it inward to the psyche. She contends that in the nineteenth century character cleaved from the body and its physical appearance in a shift situating character

as an “inner” rather than an “outer” quality (29). At the end of the nineteenth century, *The Intimate Pulse of Reality* shows, English realists became increasingly interested in dynamic physical encounters and bodily impulses, thereby re-infusing character with materiality. Character, during this period, was thus thought to form not only through intentional acts such as thought or speech, but through physical actions and reactions. In this way, the literary history of character I tell is quite different from E.M. Forster’s account of the inevitable historical transition from “flat” to “round” characters, in which round characters are thought to more adequately represent the depth and complexity of human consciousness (Forster 67). Indeed, as I argue, the turn away from plot at the end of the nineteenth century actually speaks to an exhaustion with the dialectic of “flatness” and “roundness” essential to the Victorian multi-plot novel.

Twenty years before Clough would denounce the rigid characters of the mid-Victorian novel as “vapid posturing creatures without stamina or force, fit only for a waxwork show”—calling for more inconsistent and “impulsive” characters—the physiologist George Henry Lewes had criticized Dickens for producing characters that “want the distinctive peculiarity of organic action, that of fluctuating spontaneity.” In his 1872 essay, “Dickens in Relation to Criticism” Lewes argued that Dickens’ characters were entirely predicable in nature, comparing Dickens’ characters to frogs that have had their brains removed in scientific experiment. As he explained the analogy,

Place one of these brainless frogs on his back and he will at once recover the sitting posture; draw a leg from under him, and he will draw it back again; tickle or prick him and he will push away the object, or take *one* hop out of the way; stroke his back, and he will utter *one* croak. All these things resemble the action of the unmutated frog, but they differ in being

isolated actions, and *always the same*: they are as uniform and calculable as the movements of a machine. (148-9)

That Dickens' characters come always furnished with "some well-marked physical trait; some peculiarity of aspect, speech, or manner which everyone recognized at once," renders them like vivisected frogs: mechanistic, unchanging, and predictable (146).

While Lewes was writing his essay on Dickens, his longtime partner, the novelist George Eliot, was composing Book IV of her famous novel *Middlemarch* (1871-2).¹⁹ Book IV introduces the rather forgettable character Joshua Rigg—a character identified by a single unchanging feature, his frog-like face. Rigg, we are told, was "a man perhaps about two or three and thirty, whose prominent eyes, thin-lipped, downward-curved mouth, and hair sleekly brushed away from a forehead that sank suddenly above the ridge of the eyebrows, certainly gave his face a batrachian unchangeableness of expression" (312). Batrachia are "One of Brongniart's four orders of Reptiles, including frogs, toads, newts, salamanders, etc., which have no ribs, and a soft scaleless skin, and breathe by means of gills during the early part, or whole, of their existence" ("Batrachia, N1").²⁰ Rigg's unchangeable "frog-face" (referenced five times throughout the novel) is, to use Lewes' term, a "well-marked physical trait" that gives him a distinctly Dickensian quality (308). Rigg is "passive," sits in "unaltered calm" amid a sea of "complexions changing subtly," and is said to have "experienced no surprise" when he is named the executor of Featherstone's will (315-16).²¹ Indeed, Rigg, is not a character at all, but a plot device introduced in chapter thirty-five to claim Featherstone's fortune and prevent Fred Vincy

¹⁹ Book IV of *Middlemarch* was composed roughly between November 1871 and January 1872 (Beatty 131). Lewes' "Dickens in Relation to Criticism" appeared in February 1872.

²⁰ Rigg's unchangeable character is ironic given that batrachia undergo vast physiological transformation throughout the course their life.

²¹ A static and cartoonish figure, Rigg resembles the figurine of "preserved frogs fighting a small-sword duel" perceived in a shop window by Wegg (remark the similarity in name) in *Our Mutual Friend* (1864-5) (77).

from becoming his uncle's executor. For the author of this complex multi-plot novel, that is, he is a rig, a tool employed to create suspense and facilitate narrative progression. After passing Featherstone's property along to Bulstrode, and putting Bulstrode into contact with the problematic character of Raffles, Rigg disappears entirely from the narrative. "Farewell, Josh—and if forever!" yells Raffles (390).

As the century turned and the three-volume novel disappeared from the shelves of lending libraries, minor characters like Rigg began to fade away alongside the serial form they helped to sustain. Eliot's self-conscious treatment of Rigg as a plot device is an important marker of this transformation. In his book on minor characters in the realist novel, *The One vs. the Many* (2003) Alex Woloch suggests that *Middlemarch* is unique in the way that it refuses to choose between "the one and the many," distributing narrative emphasis across its many characters. I would add that when *Middlemarch* does introduce minor characters it does so with a heightened self-consciousness concerning their (regretfully necessary) narrative function. Drawing attention to the mutual dependence of the machinations of plot on minor and flat characters like Rigg, Eliot's novel looks forward to a realism that would more fully cultivate what Lewes called a "fluxuating spontaneity" of character. As the narrator of *Middlemarch* puts it, "character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing" (694). Placing Eliot's *Middlemarch* at the start of a turn toward description as a site of experimental possibility, this dissertation suggests that Eliot's self-conscious characterizations in this oft-analyzed *Bildungsroman* paved the way for less teleological, less-narratively driven representations of subjectivity at the turn of the twentieth century. Indeed, in her final published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), Eliot herself turns away from plot toward the descriptive genre of the character sketch, exploring the traits that humans share with nonhuman things and animals through

descriptions attentive to the materiality of character. “I always thought I was deficient in dramatic power, both of construction and dialogue, but I felt that I should be at my ease in the descriptive parts of a novel,” Eliot wrote in 1857 in a diary entry entitled “How I Came to Write Fiction” (*Journals* 289). In *Impressions*, as I discuss in chapter three, Eliot borrows descriptive techniques from natural history in order to represent human beings, not as uniquely conscious or willful subjects, but as dense material formations that act according to the same logic as sea creatures and plants.

Throughout the nineteenth century the word “character” encompassed a range of thinking about the relationship between the intellect, sensation, and the body—a much more variegated range than is typically recognized in Victorian studies, which has tended to focus on the more extreme concepts of character proposed by the rhetoric of liberal self-making and by determinist theories of personality such as phrenology and physiognomy.²² In the late work of Eliot, Hardy, and Schreiner, as I show, *character* appears less as literary manifestation of bourgeois subjectivity or the biological essence of human personality than as the material substrate of perception, consciousness, and agency. My chapters show how these writers increasingly turned to materialist science and philosophy in their representation of human action and intention, creating characters driven by bodily impulse and environmental stimuli. To describe human consciousness and agency as materially determined, however, as I argued, did not necessitate an understanding of man’s nature as fixed or his actions as predestined. Hardly a solid foundation in which to ground a theory of human nature, the concept of *matter* itself had transformed, as the nineteenth century progressed, from the bedrock of the physical world

²² On character and liberalism see Anderson, *Tainted* (esp. chapter one), *The Powers*, and *The Way* (esp. chapter five); Hadley (esp. 98-106); and Thomas, *Cultivating*. On phrenology’s development of a physiological basis for character, see Claggett. On the characterological claims of physiognomy, see Pearl (esp. 93-97).

to a fluent and capricious set of forces. Looking into his microscope at pollen grains in 1827, the botanist Robert Brown, remarked upon “very unexpected fact of seeming vitality” in things that were neither alive nor organic (470). It took the scientific community until the 1860s to recognize that Brown’s findings were valid: the very substance of which the world was composed was in constant motion. Even before the phrase “Brownian motion” was coined to describe this discontinuous structure of matter, the physicist Michael Faraday has been working to overturn the assumption that space was even populated by discrete and solid entities. He explained the propagation of light and electricity not through reference to the connective substance of ether but by creating a vision of the world as a dynamic web structured by “lines of force.” In his 1874 address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Belfast, the physicist John Tyndall summarized the findings of Brown and Faraday among other materialists, theorizing what he called “the structural power of matter” (56). Tracing the historical lineage of materialism from ancient atomists like Democritus and Epicurus through Lucretius to Victorian physicists like James Clerk Maxwell, Tyndall argued that “the principle of change resides in matter” itself (25).

Shedding light on the cross-disciplinary conversations about matter and agency that occurred between turn-of-the-century novelists, philosophers, and scientists, I show how realist novelists began to portray human agency as contiguous with rather than opposed to the pulsations of the physical world. An important focal point of the dissertation is thus the work of the philosopher of will, Arthur Schopenhauer, who theorized human agency in terms of an unpredictable spontaneity or animacy inherent to all material things. As I discuss in chapter one, New Realist and New Woman novelists of the 1880s and 90s turned to Schopenhauer, as well as other dynamic, materialist thinkers, in order to reconceptualize what it means to be a subject in the first place.

Rather than setting up a dichotomy between will and drive, Schopenhauer spoke of grades (*Stufen*) of Will, a force that expressed itself differently in different kinds of objects. Drawing parallels rather than distinctions between the falling of rocks, the growth of trees, and the human will, Schopenhauer provided an altogether new model of agency, a metaphysical theory in which Will was held to be the force that underlies the potential for *all* action (conscious or unconscious, intentional or non-intentional, human and nonhuman). Multiplying the primary ur-force Schopenhauer called “Will” into a plurality of bodily sensations and environmentally produced forces, they theorized sexual desire not as a discrete or localized drive but as a multiplicity of relational affects. Exploring how New Realist novelists appropriated Schopenhauer and others in order to reconfigure the relationship between will and drive, intent and impulse, I thus broaden the purview of Victorian literature and science studies beyond its longtime focus on Darwin and English scientific theory, demonstrating the centrality of German thinkers like Schopenhauer thinker to late Victorian philosophical and literary thought. As I argue, the historical convergence of a British materialist science and a vitalistic Continental natural philosophy led to the rise of a *dynamic realism* attentive to material forces productive of character. The phrase “dynamic realism” identifies the self-reflexive period of realist aesthetics at the heart of this study, a period in which “reality” itself came to be understood as a set of complex dynamic systems—material bodies in constant motion and change. “Every Real is the complex of so many relations, a conjuncture of so many events, a synthesis of so many sensations,” wrote Lewes in 1874 (*Problems* 1.1: 343). While the realist novel increasingly came to align its *reality* with *materiality*, as I demonstrate, this “real” was far from a fixed, stable, or unified thing.

In my readings of turn-of-the-century philosophy, science, and literature, I keep one eye on the present, highlighting points of connection between nineteenth-century

materialisms and more recent ones in an effort both to historicize the seeming newness of recent concepts—“vital materialism” (Bennett), “agential realism” (Barad), “animacy” (Chen) and others—and to show how the turn-of-the-century realist novel, in its self-conscious interrogation of the practice of description, helps us to address the ontological problems this more recent theory raises. Emerging in the early 2000s out of the intersections of feminist science studies, process philosophy, and posthumanist theory, work traveling under the moniker “new materialism” has sought to transform matter from a passive site where social and cultural meanings are inscribed into an ontological *actant*, itself a force of transformation and change.²³ I take inspiration from this work—especially from feminist and queer materialists who show how the concept of matter “is shaped by race and sexuality”—in arguing that a conception of matter as temporally and structurally fluent allowed turn-of-the-century realists to actively challenge the racial and sexual essentialism of their contemporaries (Chen 5). Each of my chapters put this more recent theory in conversation with nineteenth- and twentieth-century fiction and philosophy while still remaining faithful to the historical context of each text. Beginning and ending with the New Woman novel, this dissertation moves in two historical directions: first, backward, toward Eliot, whose materialist character descriptors and pulsating reality prefigure the New Woman novel’s interest in impulse as a mode of agency, and secondly, forward, toward Hardy’s poetics of surface, which anticipates the experiments in description and liveliness of modernists like Proust and Stein. Together these chapters show how works of turn-of-the-century realist fiction engaged scientific

²³ In *The Politics of Nature* (2004) Bruno Latour defines an actant as things that “*modify other actors through a series of trials that can be listed thanks to some experimental protocol*,” explaining that he uses the word “actant” instead of “actor” in order to “rid the word [actor] of any trace of anthropomorphism” (*Politics of Nature* 75). New materialist philosophy has often drawn on Latour’s actor-network theory, as well as feminist science studies and process philosophy in its approach to agency. For more on new materialism see Alaimo and Hekman, *Material Feminisms* (2008); Coole and Frost, *New Materialisms* (2010); Dolphijn and van der Tuin, *New Materialism* (2012); and in connection to literary studies specifically, Nilges and Sauri, *Literary Materialisms* (2013).

and natural philosophical thought in order to simultaneously represent and theorize subjectivity as a dynamic material phenomenon.

OVERVIEW OF THE CHAPTERS

In chapter one, **“Bodies of Force: The New Woman Novel and Schopenhauer’s Metaphysics of Will,”** I show how New Realists, and in particular New Woman novelists, appropriated Schopenhauer’s philosophy in order to cultivate a new metaphysics, a new theory of the world as sexually driven. Highlighting the important role that women translators and critics played in bringing Schopenhauer’s thought to England, I claim that—despite his misogyny—Schopenhauer can be read as contributing to early feminist theory in its deconstruction of historically gendered binary oppositions between subject and object, mind and body, will and drive. This chapter not only aims to reveal the unexpected potential of Schopenhauer’s philosophy for feminist politics; it also intends to help us to see more clearly the challenges that the New Woman novel posed to prevalent liberal ideologies of subjectivity and self-making, thus providing new grounds for reevaluating what too often gets dismissed as political incoherence or defeatism in these works. Reading Schopenhauer alongside the New Woman novel, I argue, allows us to see how the genre worked to naturalize women’s desire in non-teleological ways.

Philosophers like Schopenhauer inspired the New Realists and New Woman novelists to theorize bodies and matter as active and unpredictable, rather than static or predetermined. My second and third chapters position George Eliot as the predecessor to these turn-of-the-century attempts to represent human life as a material and yet non-deterministic phenomenon. Together, these chapters interrogate the fixation on humanist sympathy in Eliot studies, emphasizing instead the author’s interest in describing humans as conditioned by bodily frameworks and habitual responses that allow them to sense and

experience some things, and not others. Focusing on *Middlemarch* (1871-2) and *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), I elaborate Eliot's literary project of human description. Chapter two, **"Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch*"** traces a series of descriptions of characters as soft matter—as liquids, polymers, and other types of condensed matter in a malleable state—across *Middlemarch*, arguing that even Eliot's most notoriously brainy novel, on the level of its descriptions, resists a too-easy alignment of character with individual human psychology. Putting Eliot's character descriptions in conversation with contemporaneous theories of character like that of William James, I show how *Middlemarch* develops a dynamic understanding of character as a non-deterministic and open-ended "process and an unfolding," while still representing character as a fundamentally physical phenomenon (140).

Eliot first articulated her literary project as a project of human description in her early essay, "The Natural History of German Life" (1856), a manifesto for realist aesthetics that advocated for a literary-sociological practice based on close observation of human interactions to replace idealized portraits composed with a "moral end" (131). In Chapter three, **"Eliot's Natural History of Character: The Descriptive Challenge of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*,"** I explore the epistemological and ontological problems that Eliot confronted in formulating this project. Focusing on Eliot's final published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, a collection of character sketches and philosophical essays composed in conversation with the ancient Greek naturalist and sketch writer Theophrastus of Eresus, I show how Eliot explores the practice of description through Theophrastus' attempts to describe, as he puts it, "the figure the human genus makes in the specimen which I myself furnish" (104). Each of Eliot's sketches address the limited sensory capacities of all life forms, including the human,

whose perception of the world is skewed by his own anthropocentrism. At the same time, the work suggests, in a somewhat circular move, that the only way out of the problem of description is through description: in describing members of his own species, for example, Theophrastus is afforded a peek outside his human, all too human, perspective. In this way, I conclude, Eliot's final work can be seen to position literature itself as a mode of sensory enhancement, a way of increasing the human's limited perceptive abilities.

An altogether different theory of description and its relationship to materiality arises in my fourth chapter, **"Hardy's Lively Materials: Architectural Surface and Racialized Form in *The Well-Beloved*."** This chapter shows how, contrary to popular belief, Hardy returned to the novel form after *Jude the Obscure* (1895), producing a cyclical and highly philosophical work that meditates on the fundamentally additive nature of description. *The Well-Beloved* (1897), I argue, cultivates a modernist *poetics of surface* in which description is not conceived as transparent representation but rather as an elaboration of surface. Critical of representational schemas that work to strip figures down to a basic and ideal form, Hardy, in conversation with the architectural theorist John Ruskin, attends closely to material stratification and the surface as a contact point between bodies and their environments. Reading Hardy's final novel alongside more recent theorists and historians of race, I interpret *The Well-Beloved* as a critique of the idealization of the white body in formalist and neoclassical aesthetics—one that draws out the racial implications of representational systems that forsake the irregularity of materiality and color in favor of the purity of form and outline.

In my final chapter, **"Schreiner's Pulsating Metaphysics: *From Man to Man* and the Philosophy of Relation"** I show how in her final novel, *From Man to Man; or Perhaps Only* (posthumously published in 1926) the South African novelist Schreiner

develops a “philosophy of relation” founded on the intimate interconnection of all things. Where Hardy’s novel suggests the ethical import of descriptions that attend to the historically and environmentally produced nature of their subjects, Schreiner’s novel stresses the ethically charged nature of all metaphysical and physical theories, which, she shows, are never neutral or apolitical. Interweaving Schopenhauer’s theory of the will with recent observations in physics about the “internetted motions” of particles, Schreiner (in a fifty-page essay written from the perspective of her protagonist) defends the claim that the universe itself—as a result of its fundamentally relational structure—demands a kind of responsiveness to the other, from whom one is never separate, but always intimately connected. This “pulsating metaphysics,” as I call it, stands at the basis of Schreiner’s pointed critique of biological racism and sexism, one of the most important, and yet overlooked, of the period. It also informs her theory of realism, which turns upon the relational import of the seemingly small and insignificant in relation to the apparently epic and great.

CHAPTER ONE:

Bodies of Force: The New Woman Novel and Schopenhauer's Metaphysics of Will

In 1894 the critic Arthur Waugh described the New Realism as “chirurgical” for its tendency to open up the body in violent and grotesque ways (217–8). The new generation of realists, Waugh complained, described too much, and too closely; their realism was “naked and unashamed” (219). Waugh’s aversion to the New Realism emergent in the 1880s and 90s speaks to a concern simultaneously with its appropriation of scientific techniques for describing the body and with its sexualized content. “There is all the difference in the world,” Waugh wrote,

between drawing life as we find it, sternly and relentlessly, surveying it all the while from outside with the calm, unflinching gaze of criticism, and on the other hand, yielding ourselves to the warmth and colour of its excesses, losing our judgment in the ecstasies of the joy of life, becoming in a word, effeminate. (210)

Waugh here attributes the emergent genre’s lack of objectivity, distance, and control to the gender of its authors. That “women-writers are chiefly to blame” for the New Realism, that is, not only explains its descriptive focus—the body—but the very impulsiveness of its representational technique—the lack of agency exercised in its descriptions (218).

This chapter sets up some of the broader theoretical concerns of the dissertation with the history of subjectivity at the intersections of philosophy, science, and literature. What role did the category of the “will” play in late Victorian conceptions of realism and representation? To what extent did women and feminist writers engage the suggestion, implicit in Waugh’s account of the New Realism, that women were more susceptible to

the impulses of the body than men? In what follows, I sketch out some of the critical discourses of agency surrounding the emergence of the New Realism, examining the politics of the will at work in the New Woman novel, a late-century genre that addressed women's changing role in Victorian society. A major driving force behind the aesthetic shifts inaugurated by the New Realism, the genre of the New Woman novel is best known for its tragic portraits of women who transgressed nineteenth-century sexual and moral codes. While Victorian critics like Waugh found New Woman representations of female sexuality unrestrained and immoral, twentieth-century feminist critics struggled with how the genre fails to imagine a future for its most progressive characters, who often meet with death, poverty, or other narratively punitive ends. Searching the New Woman novel for a self-empowering vision of women's agency, feminist scholars have often been disappointed to find—to quote a phrase from Olive Schreiner—“a striving and a striving and an ending in nothing” (*Story* 74).²⁴ Thus, while they might agree on little else, the genre's early detractors and its more recent critics both posit a minimal conception of agency behind its representations.

But New Woman writers, I argue in what follows, did not so much fail to understand or refuse to address the power of individual agency so much as rethink agency as complex and often contradictory category—a plurality of sensations, impulses, and environmentally produced forces. I thus argue for a revaluation of the New Woman novel's representation of agency as an account of the *multiplicity* of forces at work in the

²⁴ In their discussion of Schreiner's “narrative difficulties,” Gilbert and Gubar, for instance, lament the “heroine's tortured decline into death” in *Story of an African Farm* (53). Likewise, Stubbs, in her chapter “Feminist Fiction and the Rejection of Realism” contrasts the dark realism of the New Woman novel with utopian feminist fiction, arguing that the latter is more politically progressive in the way that it bodies forth “alternative models on which women could focus on which could act as a measure of both their achievement and potential” (113). Recent scholarship, however, has worked to recover the New Woman novel from those who had dismissed it as “evidence of the final failure of nineteenth-century English realism” (Ardis 3). Ann Ardis, for example, emphasizes the contributions of the New Woman novel to *rethinking* realism at the turn of the century. As she argues “New Woman novelists anticipate the reappraisal of realism we usually credit to early-twentieth-century writers” (3).

production of human character. In so doing, I approach the genre not in terms of its failure to reproduce developmental narratives of self-making or *Bildung*, but rather in terms of its achievement of an expansive literary rethinking of the interwoven categories of will and drive, intent and impulse. Rather than opposing such terms, New Woman novelists treated them as different forms of the same affectively charged process: will. Here I put the New Woman novel in conversation with the work of the nineteenth-century German philosopher of the will, Arthur Schopenhauer. Throughout the 1880s and 90s Schopenhauer's name is referenced in works by writers such as George Gissing, George Moore, Vernon Lee, Amy Levy, Mona Caird, and many New Woman and New Realist works.²⁵ Of the intimate collection of novelists and intellectuals comprising the mathematician Karl Pearson's radical Men and Women's Club of the late 1880s, moreover, a great many were engaged with Schopenhauer's work: Pearson himself, Havelock Ellis, Annie Besant, and the New Woman novelist *par excellence*, Olive Schreiner, whose *Story of An African Farm* (1883), is considered one of the founding texts of the genre.

That Schopenhauer would become such an important touchstone for the New Woman novel is ironic given that Schopenhauer himself was a notorious misogynist. His essay "On Women" ("Über die Weiber," 1851) argued for women's metaphysical inferiority to men on account of their inability to overcome their immediate feelings and impulses. But Schopenhauer's early English translators and critics, as we shall see, found much more to appreciate in his thought than his low estimation of women. I propose that Schopenhauer's sexualized theory of the will, when filtered through nineteenth-century

²⁵ References to Schopenhauer occur—to name just a few New Woman novels and related texts—in Gissing's *Workers in the Dawn* (1878) and *The Unclassed* (1884); Moore's *A Drama in Muslin* (1886), *Confessions of a Young Man* (1889 edition), *Mike Fletcher* (1889), and *Ester Waters* (1894); Lee's *Baldwin* (1886); Levy's, "James Thomson: A Minor Poet" (1883), "Sokraties in the Strand" (1884), and "To E." (1886); as well as Caird's *Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) and *The Great Wave* (1931).

British materialist science—especially Darwinism—offered a platform that enabled women writers to represent desire as a physical, all-pervasive power of motivation and connectivity. Reading the New Woman novel alongside Schopenhauer's theory of the Will, I show how Schopenhauer's women readers exposed contradictions in his work between his ontology and his politics, reconfiguring his philosophy in order to pose challenges to masculinist models of agency, autonomy, and self-making. Although, on the surface, the conception of agency at work in the New Woman novel might seem overdetermined or defeatist, reading Schopenhauer alongside the New Woman novel allows us to see how the genre worked to naturalize female desire and subjectivity in non-teleological ways.

In Part I of this chapter, I tell the story of Schopenhauer's rise to fame at the hands of a series of women critics, translators, and novelists, arguing that late Victorian women were not only early readers of his work, but rather crucial to bringing his work to a readership in very the first place. From George Eliot's facilitation of the publication of the first essay on Schopenhauer in *The Westminster Review* to various translations and critical works by women writers, Schopenhauer owed his early success to his female reading public. Part II then traces philosophical connections between his work and that of New Realist writers—focusing on an 1884 novel by George Gissing *The Unclassed*—showing how Schopenhauer's philosophy of Will can be read as contributing to early feminist theory, especially in its deconstruction of historically gendered binary oppositions between subject and object, mind and body, will and drive. That Schopenhauer himself was a critic of women's rights, I contend, should not deter us from approaching such appropriations of his work as historically significant interpretations of his philosophy. In Part III I analyze Schopenhauer's theory of character, situating Schopenhauer in a lineage of materialist thinkers for whom the materiality of the body

has its own unwilling agency. As a whole, I aim both to reveal the unexpected potential of Schopenhauer's philosophy for feminist-materialist politics and to help us to see more clearly the challenges that the New Woman novel posed to liberal ideologies of subjectivity and self-making, thus providing new grounds for reevaluating what too often gets dismissed as political incoherence, defeatism, or lack of narrative ambition in these works.²⁶

A BRITISH START

"Pray read the article on Schopenhauer next—I think it one of the best," George Eliot wrote to her friend Sarah Hennell on April 4, 1853 ("To Miss Sarah Hennell" 95). Eliot, working anonymously at the time as editor of *The Westminster Review*, was responsible for the publication of the article that brought Schopenhauer to an English reading public for the very first time.²⁷ Entitled "Iconoclasm in German Philosophy," the article—published anonymously in April 1853 in *The Westminster Review* by British critic, playwright, and translator, John Oxenford—described Schopenhauer as radical thinker, a pessimist and atheist making waves in Germany for his critiques of the idealism of Hegel and Fichte. Where Fichte "declared the 'thing in itself' to be no more than a mere creation of the mind," Schopenhauer, Oxenford explains, is much more ambitious in his speculations (401). "What, then, is the 'thing in itself'? 'The Will,' answers Schopenhauer with an air of evident triumph ... gravitation, electricity, and, in fact, every form of action, from the fall of an apple to the foundation of a republic, is an expression of the will and nothing more" (401-2).

²⁶ See also Showalter who argues that the New Woman novelist Olive Schreiner is "sadly underambitious" in her narrative-making, claiming that "the labors of construction and plotting were beyond her" (203, 197). Aiming to correct this view, Burdett, more recently, has argued that it is crucial that within Schreiner's novels the "modern" and "European" feminism "cannot be narratively realized" (31).

²⁷ Eliot would later reference Schopenhauer in her poem "A College Breakfast Party" (composed 1874).

In 1818 at the age of 30 Schopenhauer published his magnum opus, *The World as Will and Representation* (*Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*). The work put forth a dual aspect theory of the world based on Kant's distinction between phenomenon and noumenon, arguing that although the world might *appear* to be comprised of distinct entities—subjects and objects held together in the framework of Representation (*Vorstellung*)—in reality, the world consists but of a single, unified force, Will (*Wille*). One arrives at such knowledge, according to Schopenhauer, through the experience of the body itself—the single *object* to which we have “inside access.”²⁸ From the recognition that will is the essence or underlying nature of *our* bodies, in other words, we can thus reason that *will* is in fact the nature of all perceptual bodies. The growth of trees, the falling of rocks, magnetism, chemical attraction and repulsion, sexual desire, all these things, including human agency, are manifestations of Will. We do not know so much as *feel* this truth; for it is through feeling (*Gefühl*), not rationality, that accesses the non-representational realm of the world as Will.²⁹

For the next 40 years of his life, Schopenhauer worked to reframe and rearticulate his great insight in various publications. In 1836 he published the essay “On the Will in Nature,” a text which set out to demonstrate the scientific validity of his theory by drawing connections between it and recent scientific findings. In 1844 he published a revised edition of *The World as Will* along with a second volume. In 1851 he published *Parerga and Paralipomena*, a two-volume collection of essays intended to render his

²⁸ To quote John Atwell's précis of Schopenhauer's great insight, “From the recognition that in us will is the essence or underlying nature of the body we may conclude that will is the real nature of the perceptual ‘bodies’ that otherwise are mere representations of the knowing subject” (13).

²⁹ Julian Young helpfully explains Schopenhauer's line of reasoning with reference to the modern conception of a black box, writing: “On the objective view of things—and, here, it doesn't make any difference whether the things in question are rocks, daffodils, dogs, other human bodies or my own body—we observe the body in question affected by a cause which produces as an effect a given piece of behaviour... So we have an input and output mediated by, as it were, a black box which we cannot open... This would be the end of the story were it not for the single dramatic exception of my own body” (65).

philosophical system more accessible by addressing everyday problems like love and the practice of writing. Such attempts to bring his work to a larger audience, however, were by and large unsuccessful. In vogue in Germany was instead the idealism of Hegel, Fichte, and Schelling, philosophers who Schopenhauer famously despised for what he called their “state-sponsored” theism.³⁰ Despite a lifetime of efforts to gain public recognition, Schopenhauer spent the majority of his life unread and unknown.

But Oxenford’s article (made possible of course by Eliot’s editorial work) would change everything for the frustrated philosopher. “My philosophy has just this moment set foot in England,” Schopenhauer wrote to his friend Ernst Linder the same month Oxenford’s article appeared, in an article “with me as its subject” (“Meine Philosophie hat soeben den Fuß in England gesetzt” in einem Artikel, dass “mich zum Thema hat”) (*Gesammelte Briefe* 309, my translation).³¹ Before the publication of the Oxenford article Schopenhauer was almost entirely unknown; afterward, he “moved to the very centre of European intellectual life,” as Hayden White has put it, “not so much among professional philosophers as among artists, writers, historians, and publicists” (*Metahistory* 237). Articles on Schopenhauer in English begin to appear English journals in the 1850s, gaining momentum by the late 1870s. In the 1880s and 90s his immense popularity among the British becomes clear with English translations of his philosophical works, including the first translation of his three-volume magnum opus, *The World as Will and Idea* (1883-1886), emerging alongside a host of essays, reviews and critical texts addressing his theories. Thus, although Schopenhauer composed almost all of his works

³⁰ Schopenhauer famously scheduled his lecture at the University of Berlin at the same time as that of Hegel, only to find few students in attendance. The course was not offered the following semester.

³¹ Shortly after Schopenhauer discovered Oxenford’s 1853 article, he realized that Oxenford had published another review of his work one year previous. Published anonymously in *The Westminster Review* in 1852, the first article, entitled, “Contemporary Literature of Germany,” however, had not produced the same reaction that “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy” did.

during the first half of the nineteenth-century, due to his belated reception his work is best understood in the context of the *fin de siècle*.³²

Schopenhauer's big break in his home country came when Oxenford's article was translated into German and published in Berlin's *Vossische Zeitung*. In scholarship on Schopenhauer's reception, this translation is often credited to Ernst Linder, the assistant editor of the newspaper and Schopenhauer's friend. In truth, however, the translation was undertaken by Lindner's wife, a British émigré with language skills far greater than those of her husband. Work on women's historical role as translators has highlighted the ways in which translation—often seen as secondary or inferior to authorship—furnished women with a permissible form of public expression. At the same time, of course, it condemned women to the margins of publishing, leaving their work often uncredited and undervalued. "The history of female translation is embedded in patriarchy," Lisa Scholl has written,

with many examples of women being required to learn to read (if not write or understand) classical languages specifically to aid fathers... Yet while the initial purpose of these cases may have been to serve the patriarchal figure, for some women learning foreign languages meant that they could access alternative cultural ideologies. In this way they were learning about innovative philosophies from other societies through a discourse that was relatively untouched by Victorian codes of morality. (1–2)

Scholl has drawn attention to the role British women like George Eliot played in bringing German philosophy to England. Eliot's translations of David Friedrich Strauss and

³² Goodale has identified at least 235 essays on Schopenhauer or pessimism in British and American publications between 1871 and 1900 (241 n3). A similar chronology holds for other European countries, especially France, where Schopenhauer also gained a major following. See the appended "Schopenhauer: A Reception Chronology" for more detail on Schopenhauer's reception in England, France, and the US.

Ludwig Feuerbach—not to mention her editorial hand in the publication of Oxenford’s article on Schopenhauer—had a major effect on the transformation of Victorian moral codes. What Nancy Fraser has called “the first piece of German historical criticism to be read on any scale in England,” Eliot’s 1846 translation of Strauss’ *Das Leben Jesu*, “had a devastating effect on Victorian faith” (168). Eliot herself claimed to have found the courage to sustain her relationship with her married partner, George Henry Lewes, through her reading of Feuerbach, whose vision of love extended beyond state-recognized marriage. As Scholl points out, “By exploring the continental philosophies that were emerging and being rediscovered, especially from Germany and France, women who could translate were empowered to imagine a different discourse and ideological space” (2).

As the same time, however, translators like Eliot were aware that these philosophers themselves might not appreciate the appropriation—or even the translation—of their work by women. As she wrote to her friend, Cara Bray, of her translation of Strauss,

I do not think it was kind to Strauss (I knew he was handsome) to tell him that a young lady was translating his book. I am sure he must have some twinges of alarm to think he was dependent on that most contemptible specimen of the human being for his English reputation. (“To Cara Bray” 177)

A similar anxiety pervades the surge of criticism and translation of Schopenhauer by British women. As we will see, the uncredited Mrs. Ernst Linder was not the only woman to facilitate Schopenhauer’s reception. Between the 1870s and 90s an array of Schopenhauer translations and biographies by women appeared, sparking reviewers to comment on the irony of the German misogynist’s English reception.

“Schopenhauer forbade the writing of his biography, and despised women. By a curious irony of fate we here have a memoir of him by a lady; and it is so well done that even he will not be troubled in his grave” (Rev. 277). So reads a review of Zimmern’s 1876 *Arthur Schopenhauer: His Life and Philosophy*, the first book-length study of Schopenhauer in English. Zimmern was a German émigrée who came with her family to England after the revolutions of 1848. Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries she made her name as a translator, as well a writer and critic. Nietzsche refers to her as the woman “who introduced Schopenhauer to the English” (Kaufmann xiii). And she would go on to introduce Nietzsche to the English as well, producing the very first English translations of *Beyond Good and Evil* (completed around 1897, published 1907) and *Human, All Too Human* (1909). While Oxenford’s article lit the flame that started Schopenhauer’s career, Zimmern’s study set the forest ablaze, as it met the hands of English authors like Robert Browning (Leslie White 92), Olive Schreiner (Lefew-Blake 50), and countless others British intellectuals. The following year, a rush of articles and books about Schopenhauer and pessimism would appear, such as Francis Bowen’s *Modern History from Descartes to Schopenhauer* and James Sully’s *Pessimism: a History and a Criticism* (1877).

Not unlike Eliot in her letter to Cara Bray, Zimmern in *Arthur Schopenhauer* demonstrates a certain self-consciousness about producing scholarship about someone who held such derogatory views of women. Pointing out the philosopher’s “misogyny,” as she herself identifies it, Zimmern wonders whether Schopenhauer simply never met any intelligent women (98). As she puts it,

It will be remembered that Schopenhauer, so far as we know, was an utter stranger to intimacy with intellectual or distinguished women, and that he seems never to have met one capable of reflecting his ideas. Had this been

the case, he might not have so roundly denied the very possibility of genius to women. (98)

Zimmern's comments here might be said to speak to her own vexed feelings toward her subject. Had Schopenhauer actually met women capable of "reflecting his ideas"—women like Zimmern, for instance—he might not have held such a negative opinion of the female sex. This biographical justification for Schopenhauer's unseemly views on women would continue to be used to explain his misogyny. Referencing his strained relationship to his mother, the novelist Johanna Schopenhauer, another article published later that year insisted that the philosopher's "caustic remarks on female weakness" have "no connection whatever with the essence of his doctrine;" he merely had a troubled relationship with his mother (Hueffer 778–9).

The path that George Eliot had paved with her early translations of Strauss and Feuerbach (and, less visibly, through her editorial work at the *Westminster Review*) opened the door for later generations of women writers whose interest in German philosophy would result in translations of additional Schopenhauer works. After Zimmern, two other women came to play an integral role in Schopenhauer's British reception. In 1889 Mrs. Karl Hillebrand published the collection *Two Essays By Arthur Schopenhauer*, which provided the first English translations of *On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of Sufficient Reason* (1813) and *On the Will in Nature* (1836). The former had been Schopenhauer's dissertation, long considered by him to be the "introduction" to *The World as Will and Representation*, and the latter was the afore-mentioned treatise that sought to relate his theory to contemporary scientific findings. Over 400 pages, this major collection provided a crucial introduction to Schopenhauer's thought.³³ The

³³ Like many other female intellectuals of this period, Hillebrand is known to history largely for her connection to famous men. Most famously, she had an affair with Richard Wagner, who almost left his wife for her in 1850. But Hillebrand had multiple identities: born Jessie Taylor, she became Jessie Laussot

novelist Thomas Hardy bought the collection within the year, reading and annotating it extensively while he composed *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891) (Weber 3).³⁴ In 1897 another collection of essays translated by a woman appeared. Where Hillebrand's *Two Essays* had brought together two of the philosopher's most challenging works, Mrs. Rudolf Dircks' *Essays of Schopenhauer* was a much more accessible compilation. Featuring translations of eleven of Schopenhauer's shorter essays on such topics such as love, authorship, and art, Dirck's essays brought Schopenhauer to a more general audience.

Dircks' collection was in many ways typical of English translations of Schopenhauer. The first translation of *The World as Will and Idea* appeared from Haldane and Kemp from 1883-1886, but meanwhile translations of the short pieces that comprise *Parerga and Paralipomena* were being published frequently and consistently throughout the 1880s and 90s.³⁵ The relative brevity of these essays meant that they were easy to retranslate and reprint, and may also have rendered them more accessible and approachable to women readers. Without the formal philosophical education of many of their male counterparts, Victorian women may have been more likely to pick up a collection of essays covering topics such as suicide, love, and writing, than a three-volume metaphysical treatise. In his 1894 study, *Man and Woman: A Study of Human Secondary Sexual Characters*, the sexologist Havelock Ellis speculates along these lines. Attempting to explain the apparent interest of women readers in Schopenhauer, Ellis

after marrying a French wine merchant. After separating from her husband, she would go on to marry German historian, Karl Hillebrand, with whom she would live in Florence until the end of her years. In Italy she became known for her musical accomplishments, founding an *a capella* choir and publishing a treatise on music in Italian under the name Aldobrandini.

³⁴ Hardy also owned and annotated *Studies in Pessimism*, a collection of Schopenhauer essays edited by Saunders.

³⁵ In addition to those of Hillebrand (1889) and Dirks (1897), are those of Droppers and Dachsel (1881), Saunders (1889, 1890, 1891, 1896, 1897), Bax (1891). Bax was a prominent anti-feminist who published pieces like "Some Current Fallacies on the Woman Question" (1897). "Why I Am an Anti-Suffragist" (1909) and *The Fraud of Feminism* (1913).

writes that “women are attracted to the most concrete of all abstract thinkers, to the most poetic, to the most intimately personal, and above all to the most religious” (214). Schopenhauer was certainly not religious (he was an outspoken atheist), but Ellis seems to suggest that women interested in Schopenhauer’s fascination with the concrete, the everyday, and the personal might have made of his atheism a religion of its own.

In 1886 the foundational New Woman novelist, Olive Schreiner, wrote to Ellis with great enthusiasm after having discovered Schopenhauer through Zimmern’s 1876 study. “I have been looking at that life of Schopenhauer to-day,” she wrote to her close friend,

If I had ever read him, or even knew before I came to England that such a man existed, one would say I had copied whole ideas in the African Farm and From Man to Man from him. ...There’s something so beautiful in coming on one’s very own most inmost thoughts in another. In one way it's one of the greatest pleasures one has. That Life by Miss Zimmern is very well written... (“To Havelock Ellis”)

In my final chapter, I return to Schreiner’s fascination with Schopenhauer, showing how she combines his insights into the fundamentally dynamic nature of the universe with recent findings in physics in order to stage an intervention into Victorian debates about gender and race in her final novel, *From Man to Man* (posthumously published in 1926). Looking forward to this moment, what I am proposing here is that Schopenhauer’s metaphysics made possible the entirely new mode of *theorizing*, a form of philosophy that turned away from abstractions like being, becoming, and the absolute, toward everyday issues of selfhood—questions of race and gender, desire and feeling. “His admirers were a rather motley crew and belonged for the most part to the non-philosophical classes,” a reviewer put it in 1890, “His realistic doctrine of the Will

formed in many respects a wholesome counterpart to abstract idealism of Hegel” (“Schopenhauer” 671). New Woman novelists were among these “non-philosophical classes,” but that does not mean they did not, following Schopenhauer’s lead, produce their own form of embodied philosophy.

One major thing that so distinguished Schopenhauer from his philosophical predecessors was his incorporation of discussions of everyday problems of sex, love, and desire into his philosophical theorizing. While other philosophers may have addressed such topics in the abstract, Schopenhauer’s tackled them head on in chapters like “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” (“Der Metaphysik der Geschlechtsliebe”). A major discussion point in essays about Schopenhauer in English between 1870 and 1900, “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” struck a particular chord with British readers. One reviewer from 1895 called it “undoubtedly one of the most striking and original of his writings” (Todhunter 376). Elaborating Schopenhauer’s theory of the “sexual impulse” (*Geschlechtstrieb*), this short chapter from Part II of *The World as Will* (1844) put forth the controversial thesis that what humans called “love” was nothing more than the unconscious motivations of the sex drive. Within Schopenhauer’s metaphysics, the most basic expression of the Will was a force Schopenhauer termed the “will-to-live” (*Wille zum Leben*). “The sexual impulse,” he explains, “is the kernel of the will-to-live, and consequently, the concentration of all willing” (“der Geschlechtstrieb [ist] der Kern des Willens zum Leben, mithin die Konzentration alles Wollens”) (WR II: 513-4). Arguing that individual human desires bend always to the more generalized power of the will-to-live, Schopenhauer thus reduced all romance to the desire to perpetuate the species. Just as the world itself appears to be comprised of individual objects, but is actually comprised of a dynamic force, the human might appear to be an individual subject, but is actually “concrete sexual impulse” (“konkreter Geschlechtstrieb”) (WR II: 512-3). The

sex drive, he postulated, is “the desire that constitutes even the very nature of man” (“der Wunsch, welcher selbst das Wesen des Menschen ausmacht”) (512-13).

The British often leaned on the more patent and progressive theories of sexuality developed by nineteenth-century German philosophers and scientists is clear from the connection between German and British sexology, which would develop and deepen over the course of the century.³⁶ Havelock Ellis and John Addington Symonds groundbreaking *Sexual Inversion* (1897)—heavily indebted to Karl Heinrich Ulrichs’ concept of the “Urning”—was itself first published in Germany under the title *Das Konträre Geschlechtsgefühl* (1896). That the German title of Ellis and Symond’s book depicts inversion neither as a disorder or identity, but as a feeling (*Gefühl*) is another important episode in the history of sexual impulse (*Geschlechtstrieb*) important to understanding Schopenhauer’s sexualized theory of Will. While Schopenhauer’s theory of the *Geschlechtstrieb* was by and large concerned with heterosexual reproduction, in his 1859 an appendix to “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” (published just one year before his death) he would himself account for non-reproductive sexual acts between men (*Päderastie*) within his dispersed system of biological willing. Schopenhauer’s account of homosexual love thus predated not only that of Ellis and Symonds, but those of Ulrichs and Krafft-Ebing, rendering him one of the first modern philosophers to address the topic in a sustained fashion.³⁷

While Schopenhauer’s essay scandalized some with its naturalistic portrait of love and affection, others found the piece innovative and exciting. Placing him at the center of

³⁶ See Bauer for more on the relationship between German sexology and English literature.

³⁷ Interestingly, Schopenhauer’s early theorization of homosexuality would be taken up by early gay rights campaigners in Germany such as Oswald Oskar Hartmann whose *Das Problem der Homosexualität im Lichte der Schopenhauer’schen Philosophie* was published in 1897 by Spohr, the biggest publisher in the German homosexual rights movement and one of the first publishing houses worldwide to print openly gay works.

debates about sex and sexuality at the turn of the century, the essay led him to become a reference point for early sexology—especially in the work of Ellis and Richard von Krafft-Ebing—as well for the British-born occult movement of theosophy, whose feminist socialist vision was closely tied to nineteenth-century sexual reform movements (Dixon). That out of the very few members and visitors of Karl Pearson’s radical Men and Women’s Club (a debate club active 1885-1889 concerned with issues of marriage, sex, and sexuality), Ellis, Schreiner, Annie Besant, and Pearson himself all demonstrated an interest in Schopenhauer’s writings suggests that perhaps this piece or his thinking generally was discussed amongst the group.³⁸ Discussed by scholars like Zimmern and others through the 1870s, “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” was initially translated into English as part of Volume II of Haldane and Kemp’s *The World as Will and Idea* as “The Metaphysics of Love of the Sexes” in 1886. But the essay would be retranslated and collected multiple times thereafter—most notably by Dircks, whose translation crossed the paths of the modernists D.H. Lawrence and George Bernard Shaw, both of whom looked to Schopenhauer in their representation of sexuality.³⁹

Discussions of “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” in the late Victorian periodical press worked to both *materialize* and *sexualize* Schopenhauer’s theory of the Will. The second article on Schopenhauer in English, for instance, entitled “Schopenhauer and Darwinism,” goes to great lengths to stress the groundings of Schopenhauer’s theory in contemporary materialist science. Written by a friend of Schopenhauer’s, a German-English translator from Leipzig named David Asher, and published in 1871, the essay pitches Schopenhauer’s theory of the sexual impulse as a metaphysical backdrop to the

³⁸ Pearson himself gave a lecture on Schopenhauer’s philosophy called “Matter and Soul” in 1885 at the Sunday Lecture Society at St. George’s Hall, later published by the society as a pamphlet. I discuss this essay in greater detail in chapter five.

³⁹ On Lawrence’s annotations of Dircks’ translation, see Brunsdale. On the connection between Shaw’s notion of the “Life Force” and Schopenhauer’s Will in *Man and Superman*, see Grene (esp. 56–7).

theory of evolution.⁴⁰ “What Schopenhauer called ‘the *metaphysics* of sexual love,’” Asher writes, “he might, had he been acquainted with Darwin’s theory, have designated by the opposite name [a physics], for his own speculations are now proved to be well grounded, and to have a thoroughly *physical*, or quite natural basis (329).

Contending that “Schopenhauer taught inductively what Darwin has proved inductively,” Asher reads Schopenhauer as a naturalist whose theory of the will can be confirmed with modern science. Indeed, Schopenhauer—trained in medicine prior to switching to study philosophy—strove to make his philosophical claims compatible with the latest scientific findings. That the English were especially drawn to Schopenhauer’s philosophical naturalism is apparent from various articles which cite Schopenhauer’s contributions to scientific thought. A reviewer in the inaugural issue the journal *Mind* remarked in 1876 that within Schopenhauer’s philosophy “the fundamental physical unity [Will] seems to be in harmony with the most recent physical conceptions” (Adamson 492). While drawing a similar conclusion, Asher, for his part, argues that Schopenhauer’s naturalism is even more radical than that of Darwin: whereas Darwin “in his speculations seems purposely to stop short of man,” as Asher points out, Schopenhauer is unafraid to count humans as one of many animals and things driven by instinct (329). This is one of the most revolutionary aspects of “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love”: just like animals

⁴⁰ Asher was a German-English translator from Leipzig who became friends with Schopenhauer mid century. Schopenhauer called him his “apostle,” which within Schopenhauer’s rather egocentric system, signaled that he truly understood him (“evangelicals,” on the other hand, only somewhat understood his work). In 1857 Schopenhauer recommends that Asher translate his works following the model of Oxenford, who had translated and glossed various passages and lines from *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* in his 1853 essay. Schopenhauer wrote to Asher: “Das Sie so *thoroughly* angläsirt sind, wären Sie gut qualifiziert zum Uebersetzen meiner Werke... Als Muster und Vorbild dazu würde ich Ihnen die wenigen Seiten empfehlen, welche Oxenford, in *Westminister Review*, April 1853, so übersetzt hat, dass ich *quite amazed* war: nicht bloss den Sinn, sondern den Stil, meine Manieren und Gesten, zum Erstaunen; wie im Spiegel! – Ich würde sogar recht gern Ihre Übersetzung vor der Absendung durchsehn, *to prevent all possibility of a mistake, & to see that all be right*. Denn verstehe ich Englisch, wie Deutsch; in der Regel hält jeder Engländer, in der ersten Viertelstunde, mich für seinen Landsmann. *Think of it*” (*Gesammelte Briefe* Nr. 436).

and plants, Schopenhauer suggests, humans are organic beings whose attraction is ruled by forces greater than any one individual.

While Asher, writing in early 1871, was right to point out that Darwin had theretofore shied away from bringing the human into discussions of evolutionary theory, however, within just a few weeks Darwin would do just that. In *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), the first edition of which appeared the same month as Asher's article, Darwin brings man into the evolutionary schema, developing a social Darwinism in response to the work of Herbert Spencer and other sexual scientists. In his second edition in 1874, moreover, Darwin would draw an explicit connection between his theory of sexual love and that of Schopenhauer. "As the German philosopher Schopenhauer remarks," Darwin writes, quoting Schopenhauer,

The final aim of all love intrigues, be they comic or tragic, is really of more importance than all other ends in life. What it all turns upon is nothing less than the composition of the next generation... It is not the weal or woe of any one individual, but that of the human race to come, which is here at stake. (653)

This quotation is not in fact from Schopenhauer, as Darwin implies ("The Metaphysics of Sexual Love" had not yet been translated into English, and Darwin's German was limited) but rather is plucked straight from Asher's article, which Darwin must have encountered sometime between the publication of the first and second editions of *The Descent*.⁴¹

⁴¹ More recent critics have also argued for parallels between Schopenhauer's philosophy of Will and the theory of natural selection. As Bryan Magee remarks, for instance, "Well before Darwin, [Schopenhauer] took an evolutionary view of the mind, seeing it essentially as a survival mechanism which was necessitated at a certain stage in the evolution of living organisms" (156).

Across the final decades of the nineteenth century, these feedback loops of early sexual theorizing, compounding and reverberating across continents and time, facilitated in many quarters a growing consciousness of the human as a material creature motivated by impulse and drive. While naturalists long had placed man, to quote Buffon, “in the class of the animals, which he resembles in everything material,” philosophers like Schopenhauer argued that even the most seemingly human of desires—love—was a manifestation of a blind, material struggle for existence in which all species participated (Buffon, qtd. in Sloan 112). Schopenhauer’s “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love” was a key text in these discussions, especially in literary circles. In the following section, I propose that Schopenhauer’s description of the human as “concrete sexual impulse” was an important precept for the New Woman novel and its critique of the institutions of marriage and monogamy. Like Schopenhauer, who suggests that the sexual impulse “blows away such human laws and scruples,” New Realists and New Woman novelists like George Gissing, Mona Caird, and George Moore invoked a naturalized sexual impulse principle disruptive to Victorian moral codes and traditions (*WR* II: 553).

“THE METAPHYSICS OF SEXUAL LOVE”

In her path-breaking study, *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* (1990), Ann Ardis brought the New Woman novel into new critical focus by arguing that the debates surrounding what William Frierson has termed “the English controversy over realist fiction” between 1885 and 1895 had less to do with aesthetics than “the question of where sexuality figures in the whole of human character” (50). What distinguished the realism of the New Woman novel from the realisms before it, Ardis proposes, was its alignment of “reality” with “sexuality” (34). Differentiating itself both from prior versions of English realism and from French naturalism, New Realists

and New Woman novelists, Ardis contends, set out to describe a deeper, truer source of human motivation and decision-making. Elaborating on Ardis' thesis, I argue that in conversation with Schopenhauer and others, the genre introduced not only a new set of novelistic subjects, but a new dynamic metaphysics, a new theory of the world sexually driven. Like Schopenhauer, New Woman novelists, describe the sexual impulse as "the desire that constitutes even the very nature of man" (WR II: 512-3). Emphasizing the dynamic nature of desire, however, New Woman novelists multiply Schopenhauer's singular Will into an ecology of sensations, wills, and impulses, incorporating what Schopenhauer called the *Geschlechtstrieb* into their multiple conception of agency.

In his 1895 essay "The Fiction of Sexuality," the critic James Ashcroft Noble attacked the New Woman novel on the very grounds that it was founded, verisimilitude, contending that its representation of human life is skewed by an "erotomania" that "unnaturally isolates" one aspect of life over the rest (493). The suggestion that human agency could be reduced purely to sexual desire, Noble argued, was "a flagrant violation of the obvious proportion of life" (Noble 493). "The new fiction of sexuality," he wrote, citing novelists such as Sarah Grand and George Egerton (Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright), "presents to us a series of pictures painted from reflections in convex mirrors, the colossal nose which dominates the face being represented by one colossal appetite which dominates life" (493). Invoking an image from Stendhal's realist maxim that "the novel is a mirror being carried along a road," Noble's suggestion that the New Woman novel overemphasizes sexuality in the same way that a bad painter might render too large the nose of his subject submits its realism to the test of proportion that founded novelistic characterization in the first place. As Deidre Lynch demonstrates in *The Economy of Character: Novels, Market Culture, and the Business of Inner Meaning* (1998), across the eighteenth century, the distinction between *character* and *caricature* became increasingly

important as the novel “worked to validate and naturalize a concept of character as representational” (3). As the novel emerged, excesses of caricature were gradually devalued in favor of an aesthetic style that carefully controlled the number of “strokes” necessary to render a character realistic.

That these debates continued well into the 1890s signals the enduring nature of the question of what constitutes a “realistic” character. While critics like Noble attacked what they understood to be the suggestion of the New Woman novel—that “sexual passion provides the main-spring of ... action”—New Woman novelists argued that their representations were more true to reality than the prudish novels that came before them (Noble 493). “Life being a physiological fact,” Thomas Hardy wrote in a symposium in *The New Review* in 1890, “its honest portrayal must be largely concerned with, for one thing, the relations of the sexes” (“Candour” 17). But the control circulating libraries exercised over the publishing industry in the nineteenth century posed major challenges to the representation such relations. As Hardy complained, “the magazine in particular and the circulating library in general do not foster the growth of the novel which reflects and reveals life” (“Candour” 17). Likewise, the New Realist George Moore argued that the censorship of librarians meant that artists were not “free to go to nature” (*Literature* 28). After Moore’s novel *A Modern Lover* (1884) was withdrawn from the shelves for its vulgarity, he composed a treatise arguing that the publishing industry in England was preventing writers from describing the full vitality of life. The intense moralism of circulating libraries, he lamented, had turned humanity into a “pulseless, non-vertebrate, jelly-fish sort of thing, which securely packed in tin-cornered boxes, is sent from the London depot and scattered through the drawing rooms of the United Kingdom” under the name of literature (28). The humanity presented in these novels, he wrote, was altogether “headless, trunkless, limbless” (28).

Returning character to the body, novelists like Moore resisted the inward turn Lynch attributes to early novelistic characterizations. As character stretched across the access of plot, Lynch argues, it came to be associated with meanings that were hidden and immaterial, rather than apparent in the physical features of the individual. Reacting against the gradual disembodiment of character through a focus on development and self-cultivation, New Woman novelists developed narratives that centered not on *Bildung*, but rather the exploration of dispersed and non-teleological drives. Hardy's novels infamously refused what he called "the regulation finish that 'they were married and were happy ever after'" ("Candour" 17). Likewise, Moore paints the human as a fully embodied, and impulsive creature, highlighting the power of the body over the mind, the instinctual over the learned. Drawing parallels between Moore's and Schopenhauer's thought, David Alvarez has argued that Moore's novels offer a minimal conception of agency, often deferring to the "overwhelming, irresistible force" of the sexual impulse (173).⁴² The 1880s show the greatest influence of Schopenhauer on Moore's writing. His novel *Mike Fletcher* (1889) is overrun with references to the philosopher, so much so that (as Moore himself would later admit) it fails as a novel. The main character, an intellectual and womanizer named Mike Fletcher, writes "a poem on Schopenhauer's philosophy" that depicts the life as a turbulent sea in which "tides of passion" rise only to be "lashed by repression to tenfold fury" (48–9). "The rage and the seething of the sea is the image I select to represent the struggle for life," Mike explains, "The dawn is my

⁴² The protagonist of Moore's 1894 novel *Esther Waters*, Alvarez points out, is constantly acting "without knowing why" (224) being "touched against her will" (208) or "speaking instinctively" (79). Unable to convince herself to marry the respectable Fred, she chooses instead to live with William, the father of her child, toward whom she feels an instinctive pull. "We don't choose our lives," Esther tells William, "we just make the best of them" (307). Alvarez sees in Moore's novel the relentless striving of Schopenhauer's "will to live," which directs humans through their most basic desire to perpetuate the species. As he argues, "Moore's depiction of the self, his emphasis upon resignation, and his exploration of the maternal strength of the female all show the influence of Schopenhauer" (169). For more on Moore's relationship to Schopenhauer see Bridgewater, who argues that Moore likely learned of the philosopher from French sources while he was living in Paris (13).

image for the diffusion and triumph of sufficient reason” (50). Mike’s choice metaphor echoes Schopenhauer’s frequent description of the Will as moving water: Will appears in the world of Representation as gravity, magnetism, electricity, human desire, and “the powerful, irresistible impulse with which masses of water rush downwards” (“den gewaltigen, unaufhaltsamen Drang ... mit dem die Gewässer der Tiefe zueilen”) (*WR I*: 118).

In Mike’s apocalyptic poem, the flowing force of water is aligned with the hero’s attraction to a dying woman he meets and nourishes back to health. The last two beings on earth, the man and woman could repopulate the earth by giving way to the procreative force of the will-to-live that draws them together. Rather than save the human species, however, Fletcher’s hero dashes his love on the rocks, refusing to “renew the misery and abomination which it required all the courage and all the wisdom of all the ages to subdue” (53). Mike’s poem takes cues from Schopenhauer’s contention that nonexistence is preferable to existence, which produces only suffering. Importantly, while Schopenhauer’s ontology turns upon the claim that the Will drives all of existence, his normative philosophy advocates self-renunciation as the only ethical response to the constant striving induced by the Will. Schopenhauer advocated the renunciation of the Will not, as Fletcher implies, through murder or suicide, but rather through acetic resignation and aesthetic contemplation.

While Moore’s novels by and large embrace the ethics of self-renunciation that Schopenhauer preached, however, other New Woman novelists cultivated a more Nietzschean approach, splintering Schopenhauer’s singular Will into a multiplicity of impulses, and advocating the affirmation, rather than the denial of, the Will. Gilles Deleuze has argued that Nietzsche’s break with Schopenhauer rests on his insistence that the will was multiple rather than singular. “Because the will, according to Schopenhauer,

is essentially unitary,” Deleuze explains, “the executioner comes to understand that he is one with his own victim” (*Nietzsche* 7). In rendering the Will multiple—in insisting that force is always related to another force, and thus that force is irreducibly differential—Nietzsche rids himself of the need of self-denial. Likewise, in George Gissing’s *The Unclassed* (1884, 1895), we see Schopenhauer appropriated in a way much more typical of the New Realism and the New Woman novel, one that multiplies Schopenhauer’s will into an complex of impulses, and in so doing, emphasizes the productive possibilities of Will.⁴³ In what remains of this section, I offer a reading of *The Unclassed* that highlights how Schopenhauer thinking opened up new avenues for theorizing women’s agency outside of the framework of free will versus determinism that accompanied such binaries. In Gissing’s novel, we see that Schopenhauer’s theory of the sexual impulse provided an alternative way of thinking agency—that is, through relationality and co-constituted desire, rather than as a self-propelled intention. Rather than advocating for an extension of Schopenhauer’s idealized masculine model of subjectivity to women, *The Unclassed* transforms the abject figure of the all-too-embodied and impulsive woman into its own ideal—one that a new generation of men might learn from.

In *The Unclassed* Schopenhauer’s metaphysics is invoked in the service of a critique of the institutions of marriage and monogamy, which, the novel suggests, limit the potential of human connection. Gissing develops this line of thinking by invoking a very typical Victorian plot device—the angel/whore dichotomy—while at the same time effecting a radical undoing of this binary. The title of Gissing’s novel refers to those who “dwell in a limbo external to society,” sexual and social outsiders whose class is indeterminate (Gissing, *The Unclassed* vi). The novel follows one such character,

⁴³ Gissing extensively revised *The Unclassed* for republication in 1895. All quotations cited in what follows are present in both the 1884 and 1895 editions.

Osmond Waymark, an artist who makes his living as rent collector in east London, and who must make a difficult decision between two women, the angelic and dutiful Maud Enderby and the embodied and passionate Ida Starr. Maud is a middle-class Christian woman who lives with her parents, Ida, a prostitute struggling to find her way out of the profession after having drifted slowly into poverty after the death of her single mother. Faced with the choice between the prostitute and the angel in the house, Waymark finds himself torn. Maud in many ways resembles Schopenhauer's acetic subject; "oppressed with the consciousness of sin," she regards "every most natural impulse ... as a temptation to be resisted with all her strength" (149). Ida, on the other hand, follows her impulses—and she stirs them in Waymark too.

Through the rhetoric of impulse Gissing contrasts Waymark's passionate feelings for Ida with his feelings of duty toward Maud. Upon encountering Ida, "Waymark felt his pulses throb at the sound of her voice and the touch of her hand" (109). Maud, however, "had never made his pulse quicken, as it had often done when he had approached Ida" (235). While Gissing risks reproducing through Maud and Ida an oversimplified angel/whore dichotomy, his novel is ultimately designed to critique such an opposition. It is through the idealization of the "angel in the house" as she who suppresses her impulses, *The Unclassed* implies, that the conception of the "fallen woman" as determined and impulse-driven is produced. Gissing's critique of women's social roles here echoes an insightful argument made by Schopenhauer in his otherwise misogynistic essay "On Women." Citing London's 80,000 prostitutes, in an anomalously progressive moment Schopenhauer's essay proposes that prostitution emerges, ironically, out of the worship of pure and respectable women (*Parerga* II: 623). Pointing to the limited options for lower class women who fail to marry, Schopenhauer asks provocatively, "What, then, are they but women who have become the most fearful losers through the monogamous

institution, actual human sacrifices on the altar of monogamy?” (623). As he goes on to remark, prostitutes are “a publicly recognized class or profession whose special purpose is to protect from being seduced those women favoured by fortune and have found or hope to find husbands” (623). “All such women,” he continues, “who are so badly off are the inevitable offset to the European lady” (623).

Schopenhauer’s comments about prostitution in this essay speak to the pervasive dichotomy between respectable and unrespectable women generated in nineteenth-century sexual discourse. His comments prefigure what would become a frequent argument of late Victorian feminists: the claim that prostitution waxes when a society fails to recognize the pervasiveness and power of the sex drive. As Lucy Bland has written, “feminists saw the two institutions of marriage and prostitution as inextricably interlinked, the supposed ‘purity’ and sexual passivity of the middle-class woman existing at the expense of the working-class prostitute who served the sexual ‘needs’ of the middle-class man” (132). That Schopenhauer’s comments on marriage in “On Women” found a real audience among feminists is apparent from its inclusion in a 1927 essay collection called *What Price Marriage*. The collection, which featured short excerpts from works by writers from Epictetus to Mary Wollstonecraft and Henrik Ibsen, questioned marriage as natural law by tracking its historical development and producing a range of opinions about its cultural value. Reproducing the four pages of “On Women” that feature Schopenhauer’s critique of marriage, and omitting all those expressing his infamous vitriol against women, the editor of the collection, American journalist and fiction writer Katherine Anne Porter, reframed Schopenhauer’s essay as an intervention into debates about marriage and monogamy.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Porter published the collection under the pseudonym Hamblen Sears.

In *The Unclassed*, Gissing delivers a Schopenhauerian critique of marriage and monogamy through the character Waymark who, a strong “believer in friendship between men and women,” is optimistic about the potential for relationships between the sexes outside of such social institutions (116). Uninterested in enforcing Victorian sexual and moral codes, Waymark is a New Man desirous of a way out the marital system that produces angels and prostitutes, good husbands and seducers. While his fantasies fail to reckon with the complex power dynamics of Victorian gender relations, they idealistically envision a future in which romantic connection is not limited to marriage. “How much better,” he tells his best friend, Julian,

if, when we met a woman we liked, we could say frankly, “Now let us amuse each other without any *arriere pensee*. If I married you to-day, even though I feel quite ready to, I should ten to one see someone next week who would make me regret having bound myself. So would you, my dear. Very well let us tantalise each other agreeably, and be at ease in the sense that we are on the right side of the illusion (116)

As Waymark well knows, Maud—the dutiful Christian daughter of a middle-class family—would never agree to such an arrangement. However, he fantasizes that Ida might be open to it. As member of the “unclassed,” Ida offers the possibility of an alternative socio-sexual economy in which romantic connection might exist without legal contracts or even the promise of eternal fidelity. Waymark imagines asking Ida:

Will you accept my love in its present sincerity, neither hoping nor fearing, knowing that whatever happens is beyond our own control, feeling with me that only an ignoble nature can descend to the affectation of union when the real links are broken? (170)

But he cannot bring himself to propose to Ida such an unorthodox life together.

Could Waymark but have felt sure of her answer to such an appeal, it would have gone far to make his love for Ida all-engrossing. She would then be his ideal woman, and his devotion to her would have no bounds.

But he felt too strongly that in thus speaking he would sadden her by the destruction of her great hope. On the other hand, to offer to make her his legal wife would be to do her a yet greater injustice, even had he been willing to so sacrifice himself. The necessity for legal marriage would be a confession of her inferiority (170-1).

Waymark and Ida never experience the kind of love that *The Unclassed* imagines. While Ida gives up her life as a prostitute for a much lower paid, but respectable job in the hopes of raising herself up in Waymark's eyes, Waymark, bound to his commitment to Maud, tells Ida that they cannot be together. As the novel implies, the norms that circulate about marriage prevent desire and love to flourish. The marital system, with its oppositions between angels and whores, upstanding gentlemen and seducers, "weaken[s] affections" rather than strengthens them, pulling society apart rather than together (171).

Gissing's novel accompanies a spate of feminist critiques of marriage throughout the 1880s and 90s. The most pointed of these critiques was an essay by Mona Caird entitled "Marriage," which appeared in 1888 in *The Westminster Review*. That same year, *Daily Telegraph* ran a column in reaction to Caird's piece entitled "Is Marriage a Failure?" which is said to have drawn some 27,000 letters in response (Ledger 22). Pronouncing marriage a "vexatious failure," Caird—herself a reader of Schopenhauer who would go on to reference him in two of her later novels, *The Stones of Sacrifice* (1915) and *The Great Wave* (1931)—argued that marriage was founded on the historical oppression of women (197). Citing Karl Pearson's work on the German sexual anthropology of J.J. Bachofen, Caird proposes that women had not always been

submissive to men; rather they had been made so through centuries of training. Like Bachofen, who argued that the patriarchal system of monogamous marriage had been preceded by a matriarchal system in which women were powerful heads of the family, Caird suggests that upon the introduction of the marriage system in which women were denied their freedom, women were *historically produced* as weak and submissive.⁴⁵ Women, like the dog which, denied his freedom and exercise, becomes “dull and spiritless ... miserable and ill-looking,” have through their historical oppression likewise become resigned and powerless (188). Forgetting this history, we then point to women as naturally submissive. Through “a sort of compound interest” in which the “instincts created by this distorting process” become only more and more distorted, Caird argues, we produce “more and more solid ground for upholding the established system of restriction, and the ideas that accompany it. We chain, because we *have chained*” (188).

Caird’s argument that women have been cruelly transformed from their original state into distorted and unnatural creatures echoes the arguments of other Victorian feminists associated with the Men and Women’s Club, which she frequented, and where she became acquainted with writers like Olive Schreiner and Karl Pearson.⁴⁶ An early member of the club, Loetitia Sharpe, had made a similar argument for the powerful potential of female sexuality, contending that “‘in a state of nature’ women’s sexuality would be stronger than men’s, but as products of years of suppression by ‘civilization,’ women’s instinct was checked while men’s sexuality had been encouraged” (Bland 18). In line with these important Victorian feminists, who hoped for a re-cultivation of women’s natural instincts, Gissing’s *The Unclassed* proposes an ethics in which instincts,

⁴⁵ Bachofen, a popular figure among nineteenth-century feminists, had argued that the matriarchal period ended when male hunters raided neighboring settlements and women became theirs through right of conquest, thus founding the institution of marriage.

⁴⁶ While Caird herself was not an official member, she was associated with the group and present for its 1887 meeting on birth control.

especially sexual ones, are affirmed, rather than denied. In a chapter entitled “The Will to Live,” Waymark refers directly to Schopenhauer in order to convince Maud that self-renunciation leads merely the distortion of desire. Critical of Schopenhauer’s proposed ethics of self-denial (with which he aligns Maud’s dogmatic Christianity), Waymark proposes an alternative philosophical system in which the Will need not be denied, but instead can be affirmed. More interesting than the Christian doctrines of original sin to which the ever-repentant Maud subscribes, Waymark argues, is the myth of Prometheus, which begins with a similar notion of sin, but ends, through Hercules, with the affirmative injunction that one “live whilst it is called to-day” (225).

Like Nietzsche, for whom Prometheus was also an important figure, Waymark cultivates an *amor fati* in which life is affirmed only through the desire to live out one’s fate, to “become who you are,” as Nietzsche would put it (*Gay* 152).⁴⁷ As Waymark tells Maud, “the doctrine of philosophical necessity, the idea of Fate, is with me an instinct” (225). As Nietzsche would write that same year, “to *have* to combat one’s instincts—that is the formula for *décadence*: as long as life is *ascending*, happiness and instinct are one” (*Twilight* 45). Waymark’s doctrine of the affirmation of the will is lost on Maud, whose Christian family has indoctrinated her with the philosophy, “Life is given to us that we may conquer ourselves” (251). Consequentially, “Every most natural impulse of her own heart she regarded as a temptation to be resisted with all her strength” (149). Waymark’s relationship to Maud is likewise stultified: “When he wrote his last letter to her, it had proceeded more from a sense of obligation than any natural impulse” (154). Here Gissing, as he so often does, implies that it is in vain that one attempts to control one’s

⁴⁷ Patrick Bridgwater likewise draws parallels between Nietzsche’s philosophy and *The Unclassed*. As Gisela Argyle points out, however, any claim for direct influence is untenable given the publication history of Nietzsche’s work (218 n61). Gissing was likely not so much directly influenced by Nietzsche as drawing similar conclusions in response to Schopenhauer’s philosophy.

impulses, which always erupt to frustrate our more conscious intentions: attempting to convince himself of his duty to Maud, Waymark “tried not to think of Ida in any way, but this was beyond his power. Again and again she came before his mind (235). While Waymark “had learned to associate her [Ida] with his least noble instincts,” as he comes to realize, instincts are a part of life worth affirming (235). Although, at least initially, Waymark too “repress[es] his impulses” when it comes to Ida he comes to accept his lack of control over his desire for her, and is “thus swayed between forces he could not control” (157).

Like other New Woman novels of its time, *The Unclassed* embraces an impulsive, instinct-affirming form of agency, one that Schopenhauer infamously denigrated as effeminate. In his vitriolic “On Women,” the reader will remember, Schopenhauer argues that while men possess the ability to abstract themselves out of the primal urgings of the Will, women, subjective, too sympathetic, and always stuck in the present, are not capable of such self-overcoming: “that which is present, intuitively perceptual, immediately real,” he writes, “exercises over them a power against which abstract ideas, established maxims, fixed resolves, and generally a consideration for the past and future, the absent and distant, are seldom able to do very much” (617). Indeed, as Schopenhauer goes on to argue, the “passions” of women are the very “expression” of “nature’s will” itself (618). This curious alignment of women with the Will was not lost on Schopenhauer’s early women readers. As Helen Zimmern points out in her seminal study from 1876, in Schopenhauer’s philosophy, “Woman is but one remove from the ‘will to live’” (228). Where Schopenhauer clearly meant the association to be negative, however, Zimmern sees more productive possibilities: “Schopenhauer,” she writes, “recognizing the strength of instinct and keenness of intuition of the female sex, sees in it a closer manifestation of the original cause of being” (228). As Zimmern points out, woman,

identified as she is with the force of the Will, ironically stands at the center of Schopenhauer's metaphysics. Zimmern's comments reveal that although Schopenhauer's normative claims excluded women entirely from the picture, focusing instead on the figure of a self-controlled and *geistlich* male subject, his ontological claims placed woman at the very base of his metaphysics, aligning them with the force that perpetuates existence. New Woman writers thus read Schopenhauer against himself, emphasizing Schopenhauer's descriptive claims about the world as Will over his normative doctrine of self-resignation and denial.

In my final section, I sketch out the critical potential of this little-studied lineage of feminist theory, arguing that the model of subjectivity New Woman novelists advanced in conversation with Schopenhauer produced an important alternative to the liberal model of women's agency also developing at this time. In contrast to the theories of the free and autonomous individual upon which some strains of feminism were built, but not all of them, Schopenhauer's theories drew no sharp distinction between the will of man and that of animals and rocks; rather, at least initially, he granted the same level and kind of agency to every thing. Eliding the distinction between subject and object, he postulated that all movement, change, and desire, all human and nonhuman acts of will were the manifestation of a force *perceived* either subjectively (from the inside) or objectively (from the outside). Perceived one way, that is, things are solid, individualized entities; perceived another, they are concatenations of force. Following New Woman writers in excavating from within this framework a critique of the self-determining, masculine subject of nineteenth-century philosophy, I read Schopenhauer as contributing to early feminist theory in his deconstruction of historically gendered binary oppositions between subject and object, mind and body, will and drive.

DETERMINING FORCES

If feminist theory has taught us one thing, it is that hiding beneath every idealized theory of “the subject” there emerges a host of other more interesting theories of other abject subjects. For Schopenhauer, of course, woman occupied such an abject role. Where his ideal subject was the man able to overcome his Will, women, impulsive and all-too-bodily, did not possess the intellectual ability to abstract themselves away from the workings of the Will. Schopenhauer’s theory of female subjectivity was welcomed by various Victorian readers, who found it a necessary corrective to the “pretensions” of the New Woman. Writing in agreement with Schopenhauer’s depiction of woman “as emphatically ‘a lesser man,’” one reviewer observed that “the ‘new woman’ would rave at this satire on her pretension; and yet it would do her good to read what Schopenhauer has to say with as much calmness as she can command” (“Essays of Schopenhauer” 337). As such readers were equally disappointed to discover, however, Schopenhauer had ultimately called into question not only the agency of women, but that of all human subjects, including men. Lamenting Schopenhauer’s “misanthropic and predominantly gloomy view of the world and of human existence” the same critic denounces Schopenhauer’s pessimistic view of human agency (335). His view of the world as an endless striving, it is said, “can be palatable to no high-hearted sentient being with any courage or buoyance in his nature” (335). Indeed, those whose understanding of agency was bound up in such notions of “sentience,” “courage,” and “buoyance,” found Schopenhauer’s theory of the subject depressingly deterministic. The English philosopher Robert Adamson, for instance, criticized Schopenhauer’s theory of character as “fundamenteally erroneous” in its determinism (505). In Schopenhauer, Adamson wrote in 1876, “No satisfaction of desire is ever permanent; it only rouses new desires. Man is an accumulation of a thousand wants; his life a struggle for existence, a constant

succession of cravings, temporary gratifications, and renewed desires” (505). As “the creature of this will,” thus man finds his “character, his noumenal Ego ... determined for him” (505). But the German philosopher, Adamson argued, could not account for the agency that man clearly had, and that he himself posited in his theory of self-overcoming.

Where those who found fault with Schopenhauer seemed to do so because of their investment in masculinist ideals of autonomy and self-making, however, other of Schopenhauer’s readers recognized and even celebrated what scholars today might call his “flat ontology” in which man, woman, animal, plant—indeed, even nonliving things—were moved by the same dynamic force. One of the earliest essays on Schopenhauer in English drew attention to this point by remarked by way of comparison to Spinoza:

Spinoza says of a falling stone, that if it were conscious it would ascribe its movement to spontaneous action. Schopenhauer adds that the stone in thinking so would be right. For the law of gravity to which it obeys, and the motive which points out to human will the object of its desire, are convertible terms. (Hueffer 789)⁴⁸

The alignment of human to nonhuman agency has long been read as depriving human beings of autonomy and freedom, robbing them of their status as agential subjects. But reading Schopenhauer alongside the New Woman novel provides us with the opportunity to notice something different at work in Schopenhauer’s dispersal of Will across the natural and physical world, the potential for a more robust and expansive conception of agency, one not limited to masculinist models of autonomy and self-making.

⁴⁸ Hueffer here refers to the following lines from *The World as Will and Representation*: “Spinoza (Epist. 62) says that if a stone projected through the air had consciousness, it would imagine it was flying of its own will. I add merely that the stone would be right” (“Spinoza sagt (*epist.* 62), daß der durch einen Stoß in die Luft fliegende Stein, wenn er Bewußtsein hätte, meinen würde, aus seinem eigenen Willen zu fliegen. Ich setze nur noch hinzu, daß der Stein Recht hätte”) (WR I: 126).

In her 1993 book *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces: The Rhetoric of Fallenness in Victorian Culture*, Amanda Anderson traces the emergence of a gendered opposition within Victorian social and political theory between a “coherent and self-regulated identity” and an ruined or irrational subjectivity according to which, it was thought, “women were far more liable to the lapses of control that defined a character as ‘lost’ or ‘ruined’” (36). The portrayal of prostitutes and other sexually compromised women as the victims of outside forces, she suggests, manifests a widespread cultural anxiety about the potential lack of agency of all subjects, a threat newly emergent in what she calls “materialist approaches to character”—theories that insisted in “the power of environment over character,” and thus in the individual’s ultimate lack of freedom to cultivate his or her own identity (4, 6). Anderson’s analysis of the gendered binaries at work in Victorian theories of character is helpful for understanding why Schopenhauer’s critics tended to support his description of women’s as impulsive by nature, but balked when such descriptions were universalized explain “subjectivity” as such (34). The over-determined character of fallen women, Anderson argues, “should be understood principally in relation to a normative masculine identity seen to possess the capacity for autonomous action, enlightened rationality, and self-control” (13). Driven by forces beyond her control, the figure displaced anxieties about the threat of a materialist paradigm in which character was predetermined and agency restricted.

But Anderson’s assumption that materialist theories of character were by and large a tool for determining and limiting female subjectivity overlooks the extent to which such theories were mobilized against the model of “normative masculine identity” *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces* sets out to critique (13). Under the category of materialism, Anderson groups thinkers as diverse as phrenologists, physiognomists, Darwinists, Owenites, and others. What unites such thinkers in her view is their tendency

to view the human subject as the product of outside forces: where thinkers such as Darwin emphasize the power of environment over character formation, socialists like Robert Owen, stress the import of social circumstance. These “atomistic and mechanistic models of agency,” Anderson argues, were unfairly projected onto female subjectivity, causing the fallen woman to be “perceived, distortedly, as the mere effect of systemic forces—environmental, economic, sexual, and aesthetic” (198). Although Anderson provides valuable insight into the rhetorical operations of binary oppositions like “idealism” versus “materialism” and “free will” versus “determinism,” in grouping all of nineteenth-century materialism into a single frame, she risks overlooking the extent to which materialist theories of character were often taken up in order to trouble binary oppositions like free will versus determinism, intention versus impulse.⁴⁹

Much has changed, however, in the landscape of critical theory since the publication of *Tainted Souls and Painted Faces*. One major impetus of this dissertation is to examine how the more recent critical turn toward new materialism can restage the reading of Victorian literary and philosophical thinking about character and thus the material forces understood to shape and transform human subjectivity. Turning away from philosophical categories like intention, self-knowledge, consciousness, and motivation, scholars such as Elizabeth Grosz, Karen Barad, Jane Bennett, Vicky Kirby, and Mel Y. Chen have worked to shift discussions of subjectivity to account for the role

⁴⁹ Such binaries were already troubled in the mid nineteenth century, as Gallagher has shown. Liberal political economists, for instance, often accepted Robert Owen’s determinism, but used it to make space for a new conception of liberty. Such thinkers, Gallagher explains, “argued that the will was the product of the convergence of various unwilled psychic entities, which were the results of one’s experiences, and was therefore determined, not free. However, if one acted according to one’s will, these thinkers called one’s actions ‘free.’ Liberty, then, was freedom from external constraints and was entirely reconcilable with strict determinism” (*Industrial* 13). See Gallagher for more on the different conception of “freedom” that circulated in the early Victorian period. On morality and agency at the turn of the century, see Larson, who argues that “the ethos of the late century ... in counter-distinction to that of the early and mid-Victorian era, is marked not by a deontological escape from self or a paradoxically strong-willed refusal of choice but instead by anxious yet flexibly ethical searching, an openness to the surprising and unusual” (31–2).

of material, physical, and biological forces at work in subject-formation. Emerging out of the intersections of feminist science studies, process philosophy, and posthumanist theory, this work offers a new vantage for understanding the value Schopenhauer's dynamic, materialist metaphysics for feminist theory. As Grosz argues, "subjectivity, sexuality, intimate relations are in part structured not only by institutions and social networks but also by impersonal or pre-personal, subhuman, or inhuman forces, forces that may be construed as competing microagencies rather than as a conflict between singular, unified, self-knowing subjects or well-defined social groups" (*Time* 6). In much of her work, Grosz leans heavily on Darwin, especially his theory of natural selection. Although Darwin was long dismissed by feminists as deterministic and mechanistic in his approach to subjectivity, Grosz's re-reading of his work shows how the biologist's attention to "the movements of difference, bifurcation, and becoming that characterize all forms of life" offers an important critique of both essentialism and teleology by affirming the centrality of chance and encounter to the formation of all living organisms (17).

Grosz's reinterpretation of Darwin can help us to better understand and appreciate the stakes of New Woman novelists' investment in Schopenhauer: both Grosz and New Woman novelists excavate from within these authors' bodies of thought a rethinking of nature itself—not as a static fixity—but as a dynamic site of desire, transformation, and becoming. Consider here a short scene from Justin McCarthy's *Donna Quixote*, a novel serialized in Mary Elizabeth Braddon's journal, *Belgravia* in 1879, in which a group of women gather to discuss "theories about nature and the future world" (167). The host, a self-identified pessimist named Claudia, invokes Schopenhauer in order to expound her pessimistic theory "that everything on this earth was constructed for the worst" (166). As she argues, life is but "a trial of strength for the great rescuing and reorganizing force

which is to regenerate man,” a category that includes women also (166).⁵⁰ “And the regenerating force?” asks a newcomer, unsure to what exactly Claudia is referring (166).

Claudia looked around the room benignly; glanced up to the ceiling; partly closed her eyes; opened them again; and then, in the tone of one who breathes a prayer or speaks out some solemn and sacred oracle, uttered the word “Woman.” (166)

Here a sense of inevitability is invoked in order to situate women themselves as “the regenerating force” of the world. Not unlike Helen Zimmern, who just three years earlier posited that Schopenhauer identified in the will of women a “closer manifestation of the original cause of being,” Claudia redefines the “nature” of women with a force of large-scale, existential transformation. While the women of the club hotly debate the potential and pitfalls of the word “nature,” they eventually decide against throwing out the term in favor of a mere redefinition of the term, one that would account for its dynamism and unpredictability. Wondering whether nature is a kind of “force” or “movement,” they eventually agree that nature is a kind of “tendency,” a guiding principle always open to reconfiguration (262).

Such appropriations of Schopenhauer’s theory of the Will to rethink the biologizing discourse of “nature” allow us to read him as the forbearer—however unwilling—of a kind of feminist materialist philosophy such as the one Grosz alludes to when she wonders why, if the historical ingredients are there, we do not yet have a robust philosophical history of force. As Grosz explains, however,

force, or forces, are rarely if ever conceptualized in feminist terms... This may be because force is commonly associated with *will*, with the forcible

⁵⁰ As one woman present at the club remarks, “When we speak of men, of course we mean women also” (163).

enactment of one person's will on another (which of course is a classical definition of oppression) or on the world (a definition of exploitation); in other words, force is usually identified with coercion and authority, and thus with masculinities and masculine modes of power. (186-7)

But this was not Schopenhauer's conception of Will. His was a rather feminine power. It acted not *on* things, but rather *in connection with* and *through* them. In Schopenhauer's theory of the Will we thus discover an important precursor to these more recent attempts to rethink nature "in terms of dynamic forces, fields of transformation and upheaval, rather than as a static fixity, passive, worked over, transformed and dynamized only by culture" (*Time* 7).

Schopenhauer himself critiqued traditional materialist thought for attempting to ground its theories in the supposed "solid basis" of matter. But, as Dale Jaquette has proposed, Schopenhauer can be read as at least "partly materialist" in his investment in his description of the world of objects is material and in his insistence that the functions of the brain are themselves material processes (30).⁵¹ Likewise, Oxenford's important article on Schopenhauer from 1853 remarks that for the philosopher, "the body is the will itself in its manifested form, and in order to explain this view ... all sorts of aid are borrowed from physiological science" (404). A student of the vitalist scientist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, Schopenhauer drew extensively from scientific theory in his formulation of his concept of the Will.⁵² In arguing that "every object as thing-in-itself is

⁵¹ As Jonathan Crary has likewise observed: "Although Schopenhauer termed his own philosophy 'idealist' and conventional accounts have routinely identified him as a 'subjective idealist,' such labels misconstrue the heterogeneous texture of his thought. Never has an idealist been so immersed in the details of corporeality or alluded to such a large range of texts about human physiology" (76).

⁵² Schopenhauer took two of Blumenbach's course as a medical student at the University of Göttingen. Leon Miodoński has argued that Schopenhauer's Will bears similarities to Blumenbach's concept of the *Bildungstrieb* or "formative force" (116–7). An important distinction between the two, however, that while the *Bildungstrieb* was a teleological drive, Schopenhauer's Will is entirely directionless.

will, and as a phenomenon is matter,” he followed his teacher Blumenbach in attempting to understand matter in a temporal frame, thus breaking down the typical materialist assumption that matter was a solid and stable basis for metaphysics (*WR II*: 307).

In his 1876 article, Adamson gestured toward the ethical implications of what he called Schopenhauer’s “materialistic Pantheism,” proposing that Schopenhauer’s ethics turns upon the subject’s recognition that his “will is identical with the will of the one injured” (509, 505). As Adamson explains, for Schopenhauer, ethical action takes place “when it is seen that our true self is not in our own person but equally in others” (505). We can see here how Schopenhauer’s theory of the Will provided an alternative to more liberal and individualistic theories of the subject developing in England also at this time. Consider, for example, John Stuart Mill’s well-known argument that human beings reached their best expression when allowed to cultivate their personal preferences through intentional acts. While Mill admitted that human character was influenced both by circumstances as well as one’s basic desires and impulses, he contended that we could “by employing the proper means, improve our character” (*Collected IX*: 466). In changing one’s circumstances, for instance, one could modify one’s character to fully express one’s individual will.

In Mill, we discover a theory of character as a malleable, self-governed property. In direct opposition to the self-possession and autonomy that for Mill defined character was an inability to control or possess one’s own impulses. As he writes in his influential *On Liberty* (1859),

A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character. One whose desires and impulses are not his own,

has no character, no more than a steam engine has character. (*Collected*
XVII: 264)

In stark contrast to Mill, who defined character in terms of autonomy and freedom—and described those whose desires and impulses are not their own property as characterless—however, Schopenhauer insisted that one’s innermost desires and impulses never fully belong to one in the first place. All desires, all impulses, and all intentions are interconnected through the larger, motivating force Schopenhauer called Will. What might have been attractive about Schopenhauer’s totalizing vitalism in a moment when liberal political theorists like Mill were arguing for women’s rights on the basis that every human being had a unique and individual will, and right to cultivate it? As scholars like Anderson have shown, Mill’s theory of character as a malleable and self-governed property, while supposedly universal, did not apply to everyone in practice. Even in *The Subjection of Women* (1869), which argued for an extension of freedom and equality to women, Mill ultimately cannot avoid “casting women as somehow more subject to external conditioning than men” (Anderson, *Tainted* 37). But where Anderson implies that Mill’s theory of agency is simply not fully developed enough to account for the intersubjective practice of self-other recognition she believes ground true moral action, I have been arguing that the seemingly deterministic “materialist program” of thinkers like Schopenhauer offered Victorian feminists altogether new ways of conceiving the relationship between subjectivity and will, character and environment.

Where Mill drew sharp distinctions between the power of human agency and the power that animates nonhuman things (recall the negative comparison between the steam engine and the man with character), Schopenhauer, by contrast, drew parallels. What we call “character” in humans, he argues, is ultimately the same as the set of qualities that we

understand to comprise a thing: both are the underlying source of that thing's movements and actions. As Schopenhauer writes,

I consider the inner being that first imparts meaning and validity to all necessity (i.e., effect from cause) to be its presupposition. In the case of man, this is called character; in the case of a stone, it is called a quality; but it is the same in both. Where it is immediately known, it is called *will*, and in the stone it has the weakest, and in man the strongest, degree of visibility, of objectivity. (*WR I*: 126)

Rather than creating a dichotomy between the self-propelled will of humans and the forces that determined the natures of nonhuman things, Schopenhauer talks about degrees or grades (*Stufen*) of Will. All material bodies, he suggest, exist on a scale with stronger or weaker capacities for movement, action, and change. Employing terms formulated by Kant, he draws a distinction between what he calls “empirical” and “intelligible” character. Empirical character is everything a thing is perceived to *do*. As Atwell explains, it is the “total complex of actions that, occurring in space and time, are caused by the motives to which the intelligible character or underlying quality of the agent in question is susceptible” (46). Intelligible character is that which makes these actions possible; existing outside of space and time, it is that particular material body's individual will, that which transforms motives into to actions. For Schopenhauer, the distinction between intelligible and empirical character applies to all material bodies, comprised as they are of forces that allow them to change in shape, form, and quality as they interact with other material bodies. As Schopenhauer contends,

The way in which the character [of a human being] discloses its qualities can be fully compared with the way in which every body in nature-without-knowledge reveals its qualities. Water remains water with the

qualities inherent in it. But whether as a calm lake it reflects its banks, or dashes in foam over rocks, or by artificial means spouts into the air in a tall jet, all this depends on external causes; the one is as natural to it as the other. But it will always show one or the other according to the circumstances; it is equally ready for all, yet in every case it is true to its character, and always reveals that alone. So also will every human character reveal itself under all circumstances, but the phenomena proceeding from it will be in accordance with the circumstances. (WR I: 139)

In other words, both human beings and material objects have “characters” that are the sum total of their actions or effects.

Indeed, Schopenhauer’s entire philosophical system turns upon this analogy between human and nonhuman material bodies. As he argues, it is in and through our experience of the body (the only material body to which we have inside access), that one attains insight into the workings of all bodies. Atwell glosses the analogy as follows:

Only from a comparison with what goes on within me when my body performs an action from a motive that moves me, with what is the inner nature of my own changes determined by external grounds, can I obtain an insight into the way in which those inanimate bodies change under the influence of causes, and thus understand what is their inner nature. (100)

Important to note is that this analogy does not rest upon representational knowledge (in which a knowing subject stands separate from an object) but rather a feeling (*Gefühl*) emergent in and through the experience of the body (the object to which one has subjective access). His philosophy thus affirms a very experiential mode of philosophy, one that prioritizes—in its very method—the intuition and feeling of Will over logic or

reason. It is in and through the sensation of one's own body as Will, Schopenhauer argues, that one comes to understand the nature of all bodies as Will.

One can imagine why women readers in particular might have found this line of thinking provocative. Placing a new premium on emotion and feeling as mode of thought, Schopenhauer's metaphysics calls for a revaluation of traditionally feminized forms of knowledge. Situating a dynamic and agential force at the heart of matter and the body itself, moreover, Schopenhauer upends the "materialist program" that Anderson argues reified and objectified women as the product of "outside forces." Although matter "exhibits itself as a body," Schopenhauer argued, "its whole essence consists in acting" ("Demgemäß besteht das ganze Wesen der Materie im Wirken") (*WR* II: 302, 305). Always an interactive site of becoming, transformation, and agency, matter, for Schopenhauer, was not passive but active. Granting dynamism and agency to that which women have long been identified with, Schopenhauer's theory of the Will transformed entities traditionally considered objects—the nonhuman, the inanimate, the material, and the feminine—into their own kind of subject.

SCHOPENHAUER: A RECEPTION CHRONOLOGY

- 1852** “Contemporary Literature of Germany,” a review Schopenhauer’s *Parerga and Paralipomena*, published anonymously in *The Westminster Review*. The author is later revealed to be John Oxenford upon the excitement surrounding “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy” the following year.
- 1853** John Oxenford, “Iconoclasm in German Philosophy,” published in *The Westminster Review* in April.
- “Deutsche Philosophie im Auslande,” a translation of Oxenford’s article by (Mrs.) Ernst Otto Lindner, published in the *Vossische Zeitung* in June.
- 1854** Ernst Otto Lindner, *Briefe über die Schopenhauerische Philosophie*.
- 1861** “Métaphysique d’amour,” a translation of Schopenhauer’s “Der Metaphysik der Geschlechtsliebe” by A. Maillard published in *Revue Germanique*.
- 1863** Ernst Otto Lindner and Julius Frauenstädt, *Arthur Schopenhauer. Von Ihm, Über ihm*.
- 1871** David Asher, “Schopenhauer and Darwinism.” Refers to “The Metaphysics of Sexual Love,” arguing that “Schopenhauer taught

inductively what Darwin has proved inductively.”

1874 Théodule Ribot, *La philosophie de Schopenhauer*. The first monograph on Schopenhauer in French.

1876 Helen Zimmern, *Schopenhauer. His Life and his Philosophy*. Zimmern refers to “On the Metaphysics of Sexual Love,” discussing also his views on women.

Francis Hueffer, “Arthur Schopenhauer” published in the *Fortnightly Review*. Hueffer suggests that Schopenhauer’s views on women were, perhaps, “circumscribed by the narrowest bounds of subjective feeling.”

Robert Adamson, “Schopenhauer’s Philosophy” published in *Mind*. Adamson writes that “one can scarcely open any philosophical work without finding reference to [Schopenhauer’s] name and thoughts.”

Edmund Gurney, [Outline of Schopenhauer’s Ideas] in the *Fortnightly Review*.

1877 Francis Bowen, *Modern History from Descartes to Schopenhauer*.

James Sully, *Pessimism: a History and a Criticism*. Discusses Schopenhauer alongside Hartmann and others.

Essai sur de la libre-arbitre, translated by Salomon Reinach. The first French translation of a complete work by Schopenhauer.

- 1877** Mrs. Fawcett, “The Old and the New Ideals of Women’s Education” published in *Good Words*. Discusses Schopenhauer’s likely disapproval of the author’s argument for increased access to education for women.
- 1881** G. Droppers and C.A.P. Dachselt. Eds. *Select Essays* (Milwaukee), a collection of essays including “On Women” and “The Metaphysics of Love.”
- 1883-6** *The World as Will and Idea* (3 volumes), translation of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* by K.B. Haldane and J Kemp. Includes “Metaphysics of Love of the Sexes.”
- 1886** *Le Monde come Volonté et comme Représentation* (2 volumes), translation of *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung* by J.A. Cantacuzène.
- 1888** J.A. Farrer, “Some Ideas of Schopenhauer” published in *Gentleman’s Magazine*. Discusses Schopenhauer’s views on women at great length, expressing thanks that “in England at least the influence of Mr. Mill and Mr. Spencer has moved us in the reverse and far more liberal direction.”
- 1889** *Two Essays by Arthur Schopenhauer* translated by Mme. Karl Hillebrand. The first English translations of “On the Fourfold Root of the Principle of

Sufficient Reason” and “On the Will in Nature.”

- 1890** William Wallace, *Life of Arthur Schopenhauer*. Discusses “his views on women and sexuality” with sustained attention to the “Metaphysics of Sexual Love.”
- 1897** *Essays of Schopenhauer*, various essays including the “Metaphysics of Love” and “On Women” translated by Mrs. Rudolf Dircks.
- 1927** *What Price Marriage* (New York). An anthology of essays reflecting changing attitudes toward marriage by Joseph Hamblen Sears [pen name of Katherine Ann Porter]. Porter excerpts “On Women” such as to include Schopenhauer’s critique of monogamy while somehow leaving out his misogynist tirade.

CHAPTER TWO: **Plasticity, Form, and the Matter of Character in *Middlemarch***

Schopenhauer's belated reception meant that his theories arrived in England at a time in which the speculations of natural philosophers and metaphysicians were being both challenged and complimented by an explosion of experimental scientific research into the nature of matter. As J.W. Burrow explains, throughout the nineteenth century, metaphysics was "rehoused in Materialism, which inherited much of the tradition of nature-worship and the impulse to total comprehension of the world found in *Naturphilosophie* even while displacing it" (39). Mid-century revolutions in the natural and physical sciences had led to a dynamic understanding of the material world, one that would account empirically for the early insights of dynamistic philosophers like Schopenhauer with empirical findings. Where the theory of evolution elaborated by Darwin and others demonstrated that species characteristics were not fixed, but developed over time out of interactions between organisms and their environments, field theorists such as Michael Faraday described a world comprised of interwoven "lines of force," overturning the long held understanding of space as a vacuum populated by discrete and solid entities. Such historic shifts led the physicist John Tyndall in 1874 to theorize what he called "the structural power of matter" in his address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Belfast (56). Tracing a historical lineage of materialist thinkers from ancient atomists like Democritus and Epicurus, through Lucretius, to Victorian physicists like James Clerk Maxwell, in what is commonly referred to as his "Belfast Address," Tyndall argued that "the principle of change resides in matter" itself (25).

Realist novelists of the period thus found themselves in the position of describing a reality not only deeply material, but also structurally dynamic. “Every Real is the complex of so many relations, a conjuncture of so many events, a synthesis of so many sensations,” wrote the physiologist George Henry Lewes in 1874 (*Problems* 1.1: 343). A few years before Lewes, the novelist George Eliot had wondered whether every material structure was “but a set of relations” (234). “The wholeness of the human body,” she remarks, “is due to a consensus or constant interchange of effects among its parts” (234). Drawing parallels between the bodies of humans and those of nonhuman entities such as rocks, Eliot argues that *all objects* are active, relational compounds:

Even taken in its derivative meaning of outline, what is form but the limit of that difference by which we discriminate one object from another?—a limit determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, & partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it. This is true whether the object is a rock or a man. (234)

Eliot’s remarks here, taken from her posthumously published “Notes on Form in Art” (composed 1868), reveal a tendency to highlight the similarities between the *character* of human and nonhuman entities. Where Schopenhauer, as we saw in chapter one, attributed active agency to nonhuman things arguing that “if a stone projected through the air had consciousness,” it would be right to assume it was “flying of its own will,” Eliot, slightly differently, traces the potential of all things for movement and change to the fundamentally relational structure of universe itself (*WR* I: 126). All entities, she suggests, are lively nexuses of relations open to reconfiguration as they enter into new relations.

In what follows, I shift gears from questions of intention and impulse to questions of material transformation and change, continuing to explore the way that the nineteenth-

century realist novel appropriated philosophical and scientific discourse in order to represent human life as a physical and yet non-deterministic phenomenon. In so doing, I move not only deeper into the vicissitudes of matter and the body, but also move backward in time—from the New Woman novel of the 1880s and 90s to George Eliot’s 1870s work. Eliot is crucial to the history of realism this dissertation tells, not simply for her work as editor of the *Westminster Review* and as a translator of German philosophy, but for her commitment to theorizing human subjectivity in relation to that of nonhuman things and life forms in her fiction. I thus dedicate two short chapters to Eliot’s late writings, both of which explore her literary-philosophical thinking about character. The present chapter traces Eliot’s patient construction of a layer of descriptions of characters as soft matter—as liquids, polymers, and other types of condensed matter in a malleable state—across the body of *Middlemarch* (1871-2; 1874), elucidating what I will call a *physics of character* from within its pages. While this chapter explores the nexus of relations in which individual material bodies consist, my second Eliot chapter zooms out to consider how Eliot would theorize the interconnections between all life forms. Turning to Eliot’s final published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), chapter three shows how Eliot borrows descriptive tactics from natural history and the character sketch genre in order to draw attention to the perspective capacities and debilities of all sensitive bodies.

Often invoked as exemplary in scholarship on the representation of consciousness in fiction, *Middlemarch* is said to both thematize and foster intersubjectivity through its psychologically rich and detailed portrait of human life.⁵³ To elide the distinction

⁵³ According to Kay Young, for instance, the fundamental problematic of *Middlemarch* is “the problem of other minds,” and the “solution” it proposes is “a physiology of empathy” (4). Relatedly, cognitive literary critic Alan Palmer has suggested that *Middlemarch* presents readers with a unity of collectively thinking subjects whose communal cognitive processes mirror their own. See Palmer, “Social Minds” and *Social Minds*.

between personality and what I will refer to as its material substrate—character—however, risks overlooking the extent to which Eliot approaches character as an impersonal, relational structure formed not only through intentional acts such as thought or speech, but through physical actions and reactions. Deirdre Lynch has shown how the protocols of interiority attributed to the novelistic modes of characterization were not endemic to the novel genre, but emerged, rather, in attempts to “validate and naturalize a concept of character as representational ”(3). Extending and elaborating upon Lynch’s thesis, in what follows, I show how, in conversation with Victorian materialist science, nineteenth-century novelists like Eliot pushed back against the interiorized novelistic subject so often attributed to them by producing not only sympathetic and real-seeming minds, but lively and reactive characterological bodies. In so doing, I suggest that even the most notoriously “brainy” of novels—on the level of its descriptions—resists a too-easy alignment of its characters with the individual psychologies.⁵⁴

Consider, as an initial example, Eliot’s description of Rosamond’s persistence as that which “enables a white soft living substance to make its way in spite of opposing rock” (*Middlemarch* 324). This description of Rosamond relies not only on the reader’s experience of human intentionality, but on her sensual awareness of the fundamental properties of matter—in this case, the properties of fluids, which have the capacity to envelop solid bodies due to the sensitivity of their structure to encounters. The descriptive force of the analogy inheres in the lively materiality of this “white soft living substance”—its soft texture, malleable form, unexplained animacy. The capacity of Rosamond’s intent to overpower, indeed literally to engulf, that of her father is aligned with the potential of a fluid to envelop a rock, no matter how solid or how firm. Much

⁵⁴ In “Stupid Sensations” Kent Puckett riffs on Henry James’ observation that “a marvelous *mind* throbs in every page of *Middlemarch*,” using James to explore the paradox of *Middlemarch*’s simultaneous desire for the cerebral and fascination with the visceral (293).

later in the novel, the narrator explains Rosamond's behavior with a maxim that harkens back to her liquid quality:

We cannot be sure that any natures, however inflexible or peculiar, will resist this effect from a more massive being than their own. They may be taken by storm and for the moment converted, becoming part of the soul which enwraps them in the ardor of its movement. (714)

As we shall see, few natures in *Middlemarch* are so inflexible; most are like Rosamond in their affinity with a soft, amorphous matter.⁵⁵ Arthur Brooke, for example, is described as “glutinously indefinite” (8). He is “a very good fellow, but pulpy; he will run into any mould, but he won't keep shape” (65). Sir James Chettam, likewise, is made of a kind of “human dough.” (20). He has but the “limpest personality,” furnished “with a little gum or starch in the form of tradition” (20). Taken separately, such descriptors might read as metaphors for particular personality traits—Brooke is fickle, Chettam, lacking in substance. Taken together, however, they develop a vocabulary for the plasticity of character—a vocabulary that, while perhaps negligible in narrative function, is difficult to ignore in its consistency, if negligible in its narrative function.

Attempting to describe how this material characterology functions within Eliot's novel, I will test two hypotheses in two sections. The first hypothesis is that the loose molecular structure of Eliot's characters records the capacity of bodies for relation and, therefore, also change. The second is that throughout *Middlemarch* solidity signals the illusion of a material structure too intricate and complex to be fully accounted for by language. Phrased differently, I will argue that where soft matter, for Eliot, records the interactivity and transformability of character, solids emerge as rhetorical devices in

⁵⁵ An exception here being Casaubon who is said to have “characteristics, fixed and unchangeable as bone.” (185)

service to a realist aesthetic in which characters, too complex and real for words, cannot be fully described. Aiding me in this endeavor will be a diverse set of thinkers—from nineteenth-century scientists such as Robert Brown, Michael Faraday, and William James to contemporary feminist materialist philosophers like Catherine Malabou and Elizabeth Grosz. If Eliot's descriptors seem to reflect this more recent thinking about matter and materialism, it is not merely because I have emphasized such points of convergence. Her physics of character, whether we have recognized it or not, has informed our thinking about the materiality of characterological transformation—both literary and human—in subtle yet decisive ways.

PLASTIC FORMS

Incorporating nineteenth-century research into the activity of matter into the description of her human characters, Eliot develops a material characterology in which matter both *signals* and *participates in* characterological transformation. "Character," as the narrator of *Middlemarch* puts it, is "a process and an unfolding" (140). This process, I will suggest in the following section, is neither one of passive imprintation nor heroic self-formation, but rather a process emergent from the fundamental *activity* of matter itself.

In his 1874 "Belfast Address" to the British Association for the Advancement of Science the physicist John Tyndall ushered in a new materialist paradigm in which movement and power were understood to be immanent to all matter, rather than the product of some transcendent or vital force. What Tyndall in 1874 referred to the "structural power of matter" had, of course, been recognized by previous thinkers, most famously, by the botanist Robert Brown (56). In 1827, however, Brown's contemporaries had a difficult time believing him when he claimed to have observed "very unexpected fact of seeming vitality" in things that were neither alive nor organic (R. Brown 470). As

a result, his theory that matter was not fundamentally inert, but rather comprised of tiny, dancing particles went unnoticed for over thirty years, that is, until the late 1860s, when Eliot began composing *Middlemarch*. Setting her novel in 1828 (the year Brown's *Microscopic Observations* was first published) Eliot turns to Brown in order to imply her character Tertius Lydgate's prescience. "I have some sea-mice—fine specimens—in spirits," Lydgate tells Farebrother, "And I will throw in Robert Brown's new thing—'Microscopic Observations on the Pollen of Plants'—if you don't happen to have it already" (163).

The term "Brownian movement" was coined in 1871, the year Eliot's novel first began to appear in serial form. Eliot's novel responds to the increasingly acknowledged validity of Brown's research by producing a universe of lively matter and shifting forms. Like Tyndall—whose Belfast address turned to ancient atomists in order to warn against "the error ... in ascribing fixity to that which is fluent"—Eliot develops a dynamic physics of character that accounts for the *active* and *unpredictable* force of the material in shaping human life (7). In the nineteenth century the extent to which human character was transformable was a subject of debate. Where pseudosciences like phrenology and physiognomy approached character as a fixed constant or gradual unfolding of biological matter, political and educational theorists, by contrast, proposed that "character" was a product of the will, a thing crafted through intentional practices.⁵⁶ Athena Vrettos has tracked anxieties about the "potential rigidification of human character" in Victorian psychological discourse, contending that "biologically based theories of the mind" often called into question the possibility of "individual reformation, spiritual growth, or free

⁵⁶ On phrenology's development of a physiological basis for character, see Claggett. On the characterological claims of physiognomy, see Pearl (93–97). See Ryan for more on Eliot's critique of the notion that "an individual's development consists in the gradual unfolding of his or her nature or essential character" (*Thinking Without Thinking in the Victorian Novel* 4).

will” (400, 404). Differently, Sara Ahmed turns to nineteenth-century educational discourse in order to trace “the coevolution of the idea of character and the idea of will” (234). Where Vrettos paints an industrialized portrait of mechanized minds, minds “driven to repetitive, automatic behaviors in order to conserve energy for more difficult or novel tasks,” that is, Ahmed describes the simultaneously occurring liberal dream of willful self-transformation in which character was “amenable to will” and one could “by employing the proper means, improve [one’s] character” (Vrettos 400; J.S. Mill qtd. in Ahmed, 234). Eliot’s novel works to circumvent this binary in Victorian characterological thinking, refusing both the discourse of bodily fixity and that of mental flexibility. Her materialist characterology implies that character traits and behaviors emerge *relationally* from bodily capacities like the responsiveness of organic tissue to applied force. Borrowing a term from recent “new materialist” philosophy and tracking its use backward to contemporaries of Eliot like William James, I will argue that for Eliot character is fundamentally *plastic*.

In contemporary philosophy, the term *plasticity* has recently resurfaced as a keyword in theories of the brain and body. Such philosophies have aimed, broadly speaking, to conceive of bodily matter as more than a pre-cultural given, a fixed constant which is “inscribed” or passively molded by culture or society.⁵⁷ As Catherine Malabou points out, the word *plasticity* implies an active principle. Its etymology can be traced to the Greek *plassein*, which “means at once the capacity to *receive form* (clay is called ‘plastic’, for example) and the capacity to *give form* (as in the plastic arts or in plastic surgery)” (Malabou, *What*, 5).⁵⁸ Plasticity, in other words, connotes the *active* potential

⁵⁷ See Malabou, *What and Plasticity*; Grosz, *Volatile and Time*; and Brush.

⁵⁸ Malabou contrasts the notion of “plasticity” with that of “flexibility,” which she views as purely passive. Both Malabou and Martin critique of the notion of “flexibility” as it is used in neoliberal economic discourse.

of transformation. It does not mean that something is infinitely modifiable, but rather that it will hold a change when a change occurs. The turn to plasticity in cultural studies and critical theory, initiated largely through the innovations of feminist science studies, though now unfolding outside of this arena, has afforded thinkers new ways of conceiving of identity-formation. Rather than perceiving matter as the passive background to social formations, critics have increasingly come to understand matter, as well as nature, as an *active* force at work in the production of culture and identity.⁵⁹

In line with these contemporary thinkers, Eliot challenges our tendency to think of “character” solely as the product of human forces, be they individual wills or socio-cultural norms. She challenges them not from the present, of course, but from a historical moment in which the assumption that matter was passive, and culture, active, was increasingly being called into question. Eliot’s characterizations prefigure a crucial move made by William James six years later in his essay “The Laws of Habit” (1877), that of the fundamental plasticity of character.⁶⁰ James begins his essay with the suggestion that “the moment one tries to define what habit is, one is led to the fundamental properties of matter” (104). A basic proneness toward habit-formation, he goes on to suggest, seemed to be ingrained in the very structure of organic matter itself. A piece of paper, once folded, folds more easily the second time; likewise, an ankle once sprained is more likely to be reinjured; joints once afflicted by rheumatism are more prone to relapse. And so James formulates the hypothesis “that *the phenomena of habit in living beings are due to*

⁵⁹ Elizabeth Grosz, for instance, has proposed that we view nature “in terms of dynamic forces, fields of transformation and upheaval, rather than as a static fixity, passive, worked over, transformed and dynamized only by culture” (*Time* 7). Relatedly, particle physicist and gender theorist Karen Barad described a world in which objects, including humans, emerge through interactions between material agencies always already imbued with meaning. For an introduction to “feminist materialism,” see Alaimo and Hekman. On the broader philosophical movement often referred to as “new materialism,” see Dolphijn and van der Tuin; Coole and Frost.

⁶⁰ James would then revise this essay for inclusion in *The Principles of Psychology* (1890), from which I quote.

the plasticity of the organic materials of which their bodies are composed ” (105). For James, *plasticity* “in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once.” James’ suggestion that human character is essentially “plastic” is more than a metaphor to describe the responsiveness of a personality to influence or willed intent. Rather, as James argues, the basic responsiveness of organic matter, especially nervous tissue, to applied force makes possible characterological transformation as such.

Like James, Eliot traces character to the plasticity of bodily matter. Consider the example of Dorothea’s uncle Brooke, who is described within the first few pages of the novel as “glutiniously indefinite” (8). Brooke, it is later elaborated, is “a very good fellow, but pulpy; he will run into any mould, but he won’t keep shape” (65). Such descriptions of the soft matter of Brooke’s character assist, on one level, in the characterization of Brooke’s particular behavioral tendencies. Brooke, we are told, has “an acquiescent temper, miscellaneous opinions, and uncertain vote;” his conclusions are “as difficult to predict as the weather” (8). Despite his wavering opinions on most issues, however, in some things Brooke is fastidious. He is thrifty, for instance, always “spending as little money as possible” (8). The narrator explains what might initially seem like a characterological contradiction—Brooke’s general fickleness about most things and his extreme particularity about others—with the pithy phrase: “even the most glutiniously indefinite minds enclose some hard grains of habit” (8). On this level of characterization, it seems, the narrator can explain any given character strictly through reference to physical laws.

Closer attention to Eliot’s language here, however, shows that she may have a particular kind of plasticity in mind: that of the protein, gluten. A basic physiological guide from 1869 suggests of “nutritious grains” that “nearly all of them are composed of

two principles, the glutinous and the farinaceous, mingled together” (*Elementary* 34). According to the guide, in fact, one might reduce *all* organic substances to these two basic principles. For what concerns food, the more farinaceous (or grainy) substances are “warming,” and those more glutinous (or proteinous), “*plastic*” or “building” (34). An example of the latter compound given is meat, which “has a large abundance of albuminous or plastic principle (*the fibre of the flesh*) in a condensed state” (35). Proteins—early examples of which included wheat gluten and albumen (egg whites)—are polymers, chains of compounds known for their extreme plasticity.⁶¹ Recognized as a distinct class of molecules in the late-eighteenth century, proteins take their name from Proteus, the Greek god who could change his shape at will. Over eighty percent water and protein, of course, the human body could be described as “glutinously indefinite.” We thus might read Eliot’s maxim—“even the most glutinously indefinite minds enclose some hard grains of habit”—more straight-forwardly as a description of all minds, which, consisting of proteins (as well as, to a much lesser extent, carbohydrates) are comprised of both plastic and rigid molecules. Brooke’s mind, in this sense, is literally part glutinous, part grainy, and his capacity for characterological shape shifting is tied to his body’s proteinous base.

It has long been a tendency of literary studies to approach references to matter in literature as a space for the projection of cultural meaning or as symbolic of socio-cultural shifts. Jules Law’s recent *The Social Life of Fluids: Blood, Milk, and Water in the Victorian Novel* (2010), for instance, considers how developments in the manipulation of fluids produced “fantasies of control and anxieties of identity” within the pages of Victorian fiction, approaching novels as a reflection of shifts in the social

⁶¹ Before the word “protein” was coined, the word “albumen” was used to signify the same class of plastic molecules. “Albumin” with an “i” now signifies the subset of proteins known as egg whites.

meaning of material substances (ix). Law asserts in his introduction: “Victorian obsession with liquids had little to do with the ostensibly intrinsic properties of water, blood, alcohol or milk” (2). But Law’s contention that Victorians thought little about the “ostensibly intrinsic properties” of fluids speaks less to the actual relationship of Victorians to the fluids they described than to his own critical method, which merely *attends* to the cultural meanings of fluids like blood, milk, and water. *Pace* Law, I want to suggest that the force of meaning of material substances for Eliot emerges not only from how they are arbitrarily made to signify, but from how they more basically *act*. As close attention to *Middlemarch*’s descriptors demonstrates, Victorians were actually concerned with the “intrinsic properties” of matter. Some, like Eliot, even looked to literature as a mode of exploring their role in character formation.

A certain irreverence for categorical distinctions between specific persons and more general physical phenomena can be seen in Eliot’s descriptions of humans as material substances and geometrical forms, which operate both as metaphors for personalities and—more literally—as descriptions of the plasticity of character. Elaine Freedgood has described the “intense commingling of the literal and the figurative” in Eliot’s research notebook, which lists under the entry for “m” interests like “Milton, Medusa, moisture, mist,” placing persons (real and fictional) on the same plane as liquid states of matter (*Ideas* 111). Following Freedgood, as well as, more recently, Cannon Schmitt, in their embrace of *the literal* in literary descriptions, I read the material and semiotic as occurring simultaneously and inseparably in Eliot’s novel, such that glutinous materiality does not only signify or symbolize Brooke’s “fickleness,” but harbors it, makes it possible. As Freedgood reminds, to reduce nonhuman things in novels to only what they tell us about a character’s personality is to view them as “indentured to the subject.” While things often function as metaphors, they can also function as metonymies

tied to histories outside “the novel’s manifest or dominant narrative—the one that concerns its subjects” (12).

Likewise, I approach Eliot’s materialist descriptors, not only as characterizations of specific persons, but as a way of thinking about the impersonal forces at work in the production of character. As scholars have often remarked in drawing parallels between Eliot and Darwin, the nineteenth century was the first to amass enough evidence to show that species characters themselves were not fixed, but rather change over time as the result of chance variation and encounters with the environment. What Elizabeth Grosz has described as Darwin’s “dynamic and open-ended understanding of the intermingling of history and biology” (*Time* 17), can be witnessed in the opening lines of Eliot’s “Prelude,” in which man is described as a “mysterious mixture ... under the varying experiments of Time” (3). Eliot explores the composition of this “mysterious mixture” and its capacity for structural change in her characterizations, which explore the bodily sensitivity, impressionability, and the propensity toward habit formation that produce characterological change throughout time.

As with James, in Eliot habits are described as rigid kernels emerging out of otherwise plastic sets of compounds. Walter Vincy, for instance, “was not a rock: he had no other fixity than the fixity of alternating impulses sometimes called habit” (324). Such descriptions anticipate how James would later theorize changes in habit in terms of changes in material structure. In the natural world, as James argues, what we think of as the “laws of Nature” are really “nothing but immutable habits which different elementary sorts of matter follows in their actions and reactions upon each other” (105). For James, as Philip Fisher has put it, “Stones fall by habit, birds build nests by habit” (6). But not all habits are as “immutable” as these fundamental flows. As James points out, although the structure of a single particle may be difficult to change, *the structure of larger*

compounds is far more plastic. In other words, “either outward forces or inward tensions can, from one hour to another, turn that structure into something different from what it was,” James writes, proposing that we think of “each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure” in terms of the “new set of habits” that marks its change (105).

Like James, Eliot prefers to draw parallels rather than distinctions between the structure and behaviors of humans and that of nonhuman material formations like rocks and poems. In her posthumously published essay “Notes on Form in Art” (composed 1868) Eliot elaborates a related theory of plasticity from within a theory of structure. “What is a structure but a set of relations?” the essay provocatively inquires. In both poetry and life, Eliot argues, form is “a limit determined partly by the intrinsic relations or composition of the object, & partly by the extrinsic action of other bodies upon it” (234).⁶² “This is true,” she writes, “whether the object is a rock or a man” (234). In other words, organic forms are active compounds, not immutable unities; they are a lively nexus of relations open to change as their relations change. Where James bases his theory of character in the fundamental responsiveness of organic matter to applied force, Eliot traces the affective capacity of people as well as things to the fact that they are comprised of tiny parts which are connected to each other as well as to that which is outside of them. “The wholeness of the human body,” she avers, “is due to a consensus or constant interchange of effects among its parts” (234). As such, the “relations and groups of relations” that comprise a poem, “are more or less not only determined by emotion, but intended to express it” (233).⁶³

⁶² Eliot’s remarks here echo Spencer’s definition of life as “the continuous adjustment of internal relations to external relations” (374).

⁶³ Like many Romantic poets and philosophers of organic form, in this essay Eliot suggests that forms emerge as a result of the properties of the materials from which they are composed. But Eliot’s theory of form differs in significant ways from the traditional Romantic conception of organic form. Coleridge, for

Eliot's "Notes on Form in Art," while little cited, is integral to understanding the quest of both Casaubon and Lydgate in *Middlemarch* for "fundamental knowledge of structure" (139). Where Casaubon, in his search for "the Key to All Mythologies," hopes to uncover a single, underlying unity, in his quest for the "primitive tissue," Lydgate, however, imagines a more relational form. Much has been made of the fact that cell-theory had emerged by the time Eliot began composing *Middlemarch*—something scholars have used to argue that Lydgate's research into tissue are implicitly misguided.⁶⁴ But Lydgate's attempt "to demonstrate the more intimate relations of living structure" might just as easily be read as tissue cellularly conceived (139). There is little evidence to suggest the word "primitive tissue" is anything other than Eliot's way of imagining what a good scientist in 1829 would be looking for; "such missing of the right word befalls many seekers," we are told (139).

Lydgate's quest for the primitive tissue is supposed to build on the legacy of Xavier Bichat, an actual French anatomist who died the year the fictional Lydgate was born.⁶⁵ Eliot's characterization of Bichat's innovations in histology is telling, given her own thoughts on form, as she expressed them just three years earlier in "Notes on Form in Art." As the narrator of *Middlemarch* explains,

That great Frenchman first carried out the conception that living bodies, fundamentally considered, are not associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally; but must be regarded as consisting of certain primary webs or tissues out of

instance, suggests that organic form is "innate. It shapes, as it develops itself from within, and the fullness of its development is one & the same with the perfection of its outward form" (495). Not only does Eliot never imply belief in an intrinsic "formative force," she stresses repeatedly the power of actions "extrinsic" to the body and its biology on the organic formation. For a rich exploration of the Romantic conception of organic form in science and literature, see Gigante.

⁶⁴ See, for example, Harvey (25–37); Tambling (939–960); Menke (617–653); and Rothfield (87–102).

⁶⁵ As Tambling has pointed out, Lydgate is 27 in 1829, meaning he was born in 1802.

which various organs—brain, heart, lungs, and so on—are compacted, as the various accommodations of a house are built up in various proportions of wood, iron, stone, brick, zinc, and the rest, each material having its peculiar composition and proportions. No man, one sees, can understand and estimate the entire structure or its parts—what are its frailties and what its repairs, without knowing the nature of the materials. (138-9)

Like Eliot herself, who understands form as a relational compound, Bichat is said to approach the living body as comprised of “primary webs or tissues” as opposed to “associations of organs which can be understood by studying them first apart, and then as it were federally.” His line of inquiry is unique in that jolts anatomy out of its obsession with parts to consider the “peculiar composition and proportions” of the materials of which those parts (as well as the whole) are made. As the narrator suggests in closing, in order to understand such a complex, compound structure as the body, one must understand “the nature of the materials” of which it is composed.⁶⁶

As emotive, relational compounds, humans—like poems—possess a dynamic structure. The complexity of the body’s inner and outer relations translates to its potential to take on different forms. Likewise, in *Middlemarch*, “character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable. It is something living and changing, and may become diseased as our bodies do (694). This line, delivered by Farebrother in reference to the questionable behavior of Lydgate, draws upon the moral valence of the world character in the Victorian period. Having taken money from Bulstrode around the time of

⁶⁶ Almost twenty years earlier, Eliot’s longtime partner, G.H. Lewes had described Bichat’s “grand philosophical device” as his “decomposing the organism into its various elementary tissues” (180). As Lewes wrote, “*We must commence with the study of the tissues, and thence proceed to the analysis of the laws of their combination into organs, and finally, to the consideration of the grouping of those organs into system*” (101, emphasis in original). It seems unlikely that Eliot would be mocking Lydgate’s quite similar approach.

Raffles' death, Lydgate is suspected of having been bribed by Bulstrode in order to ensure the removal of Bulstrode's blackmailer, Raffles. As a result, as Lydgate puts it, his character is "blighted—like a damaged ear of corn" (719). Blight is a botanical disease "of atmospheric or invisible origin, that suddenly blasts, nips, or destroys plants" ("Blight N1"). It is a bad encounter between the molecules inside and molecules outside the plant that leads plants to produce insufficient chlorophyll. It "arrests their growth, or prevents their blossom from 'setting.'"

Lydgate's run-in with Bulstrode is a similarly bad encounter, a loss of integrity that results in a damage in structure.⁶⁷ A close look at the scene in which Lydgate is publicly connected to Bulstrode shows that Eliot describes Lydgate's loss of integrity not in terms of a moral failure, but as a shift in the affective compound of his character. A term from more recent philosophy is useful to illustrate the distinction. In his small book on Spinoza, Gilles Deleuze describes Spinoza's approach to ethics as an *ethology*, an ethics, as he defines the word, less concerned with the difference between right and wrong than it is with the affective or relational compounds formed through interactions. Where morality tends to foreground individual choices, ethology, as Deleuze writes, tracks the "relations of speed and slowness, of the capacities for affecting and being affected that characterize each thing," as well as how those "capacities can compound" into new relations (*Spinoza* 125–6).⁶⁸ Eliot, who translated Spinoza's *Ethics* and *Tractatus*, likewise depicts Lydgate's characterological transformation in terms of the changing rhythms of his affective connection to Bulstrode.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Since at least the fifteenth century the word "integrity" has indicated soundness of structure, the "condition of not being marred or violated; unimpaired or uncorrupted." It came to take on its more metaphorical sense of "freedom from moral corruption" a century later ("Integrity N2").

⁶⁸ As Sharp articulates the distinction, for Deleuze, where morality is "the doctrine of what rational beings *ought* to do," ethology is "the liberation of what 'a body can do'" (211).

⁶⁹ For more on Eliot's interest in Spinoza, see Gatens (74–90); Henson (18); Davis; and Atkins.

“Bulstrode’s character has enveloped me,” Lydgate laments to Dorothea after a fateful scene at the town hall, “the business is done and can’t be undone” (719). More than a public defaming, what occurs at the town meeting is the forging of an affective connection through which Lydgate begins to feel Bulstrode’s emotions. Having been publicly accused, not only of philandering his way into fortune, but of Raffles’ murder, Bulstrode begins to experience “a crisis of feeling almost too violent for his delicate frame to support” (683). Worried for Bulstrode’s wellbeing, Lydgate does something unthinkable: he reaches out his arm, guiding the tottering man out of the room. As if enacted by the touch itself, the character of “this man who was leaning tremblingly on his arm” begins to melt into Lydgate’s own, as his tender feelings toward the old crook become apparent to a crowd of onlookers (686). In a quick turn of mood, “this act which might have been one of gentle duty and pure compassion” becomes for Lydgate “unspeakably bitter to him.” Not only do Bulstrode’s wrongdoings get magnetized to Lydgate’s moral character in the eyes of those present, but Bulstrode’s susceptibility and nakedness also become his. Within the span of a few pages Lydgate’s ethological transformation is complete. He goes from feeling like “the Healer which thinks first of bringing rescue or relief to the sufferer” (683) to “the sufferer” himself (695) cringing from a similar “sense of exposure” than that which afflicted Bulstrode’s “susceptible nerve” (683).

Deleuze was not the first to turn toward the concept of *ethology* in order to explain how bodies form affective compounds. In 1843 John Stuart Mill used the same word to describe a new science he hoped would gain traction in coming years—“the science of the formation of character” (Mill 8: 861) Where psychology was concerned with the universal laws of the mind, ethology, Mill suggested in *A System of Logic* (1843), would attend to the processes through which particular personalities form. Prior

to Mill, the word *ethology* had been used to describe works on manners and morals (*ethos*—the Greek word for “character”—being also the root word for *ethics*). Mill had in mind a different application. Ethology would investigate the circumstances, experiences, and practices through which human character develops. Where psychology, as well as anthropology and sociology, went on to become institutionalized fields of study, however, ethology, as Mill had envisioned it, never cohered into a scientific practice.⁷⁰ After Mill, the term came to designate an observational branch of zoology attentive to the behaviors and emotions of animals. Mill’s science of the accretion of personal traits, on the other hand, became “one of the many nineteenth-century proposals that did not pass the test of history” (Leary 153).⁷¹

Where Mill’s ethology failed as a science, however, it survived in the work of nineteenth-century novelists. As a fictional exploration of interactions between people and their environments, the realist novel can be understood to have taken up the aim of ethology to investigate the forces of at work in character formation.⁷² The aim of the novelist, Elizabeth Gaskell would write in 1853, was to pay close attention to “the daily life into which people are born, and into which they are absorbed before they are well aware”—to describe “the circumstances which contributed to the formation of character” (4). In *The Economy of Character* (1998), Deidre Lynch argues that “novel writing’s claim to a singular distinction among the disciplines would be founded on the promise that it was this type of writing that tendered the deepest, truest knowledge of character ” (28). Demonstrating “how it came to be that novels, to be good novels, had to be *about*

⁷⁰ Despite a few efforts by Mill’s followers. See, for example, Bain. Certainly, what Mill called “ethology” resurfaced in other guises, in the field of developmental psychology, for instance.

⁷¹ As Durant, too, points out, “Only for a few years at around the turn of the century did Milleian ethology find favor in America, and in Europe it appears to have been almost totally ignored” (161).

⁷² Arac has drawn similar conclusions about “correlation between literary characterization and the scientific study of human personality” in the nineteenth century (36).

character,” Lynch contends that in the nineteenth century character cleaved from the body and its physical appearance in a shift situating character as an “inner” rather than an “outer” quality (29). As we have already seen, however, *Middlemarch* resists this cleaving, in describing character in terms of the matter of which bodies are composed.

In my second and final section, I turn to explore the aesthetic function of Eliot’s materialist descriptors and their implications for our understanding of Eliot’s particular mode of realist characterization. According to Eliot, “The highest Form is the highest organism, that is to say, the most varied group of relations bound together in a wholeness which again has the most varied relations with other phenomena. It is only in this fundamental sense,” she argues, in turning to the aesthetic, “that the word ‘Form’ can be applied to Art in general” (“Notes” 232). It is not difficult to imagine *Middlemarch* as Eliot’s own attempt at this extra-relational art form, a literary record of the role of material agencies in human lives. Taking a page from James in his study of habit, in my second and final section I approach *Middlemarch*, less as “a chapter in physiology or psychology” than as “a chapter in physics.” To understand Eliot’s realist aesthetic, I will suggest, entails close attention to the way she engages with the physical and mathematical sciences in order to describe her characters as complex and shifting geometrical figurations.

IRREGULAR SOLIDS

In her work on Victorian conceptions of space, Alice Jenkins remarks that “the problem of how bodies act on one another—how forces are transmitted from one body to another—was one of the key questions of early nineteenth-century science” (*Space* 175). Even “more than the search for origins,” Jenkins argues, “the search for the means of connection between objects and forces shaped early nineteenth-century science (176).

Jenkins' work is unique in its attention to parallels between the representation of space in Eliot's work and developments in field theory. Developing in the mid-1840s, field theory called into question the idea of "space as a neutral container within which matter formed solid, impermeable bodies" (199). When Eliot's novels are critical of the notion that objects have definite form and extension, Jenkins avers, they are consistent with the most innovative physics of their day.

By the time Eliot had composed *Middlemarch* it was clear that solidity was in part illusory. Michael Faraday's experiments with the behavior of forces suggested that objects were not bounded, contained units, but rather concentrations of forces that produced the *sense* of solidity. Likewise, in *Middlemarch* "the solidity of objects" is aligned with "the directness of sense" a mode of perception described as "no longer reflection but feeling" (198). Following Jenkins, I show how throughout Eliot's novel concepts of rigidity and solidity emerge as a way of calling sense perception into question. If the truth of character is that character is plastic, solid characters must be a kind of illusion. Take Casaubon's proposal letter to Dorothea, for example, in which the scholar attempts to flatter his object of interest by describing her as "a rare combination of elements both solid and attractive" (40). In contrast to fluids, which flow into the shape of any container as a result of their loose, dynamic form, solids are defined by their possession of a rigid, crystalline structure. This is due to the strength of the inter- and intramolecular forces that hold their atoms, molecules, and ions in a stable state of attraction. With this knowledge, we might read Casaubon's description of Dorothea as "a rare combination of elements both solid and attractive" as something of an authorial jest. Given that solids are *defined* by the strong forces of attraction that render them resistant to changes in shape and volume, the "combination" of these qualities should be anything

but rare.⁷³ The joke is on Casaubon, it seems, as Eliot undermines the authority of his fictional letter with the power of her real pen. Were Dorothea not so absorbed in the fantasy of her future life, we are told, she might have looked at Casaubon's letter more "critically as a profession of love" (41).

References to Dorothea's solidity signal misguided perceptions of male characters to whom women especially appear opaque and confusing. Dorothea is also described as "solid," with reference to her uncle Brooke's failed attempts to understand her characterological complexity. Holding Casaubon's letter anxiously in his pocket, Dorothea's uncle attempts to subtly dissuade her from marrying the scholar twenty-seven years her elder. Faced with his niece's resolve to marry the man were he to propose, however, Brooke reluctantly hands her the letter as she leaves the room. "In short," the narrator closes the chapter, "woman was a problem which, since Brooke's mind fell blank before it, could be hardly less complicated than the revolutions of an irregular solid" (39). Here again, ignorance and confusion are associated with the identification of Dorothea as solid. Had Brooke a more supple understanding of his niece's character, he might have better understood her desires.

Though she does not treat this specific passage, Jenkins has suggested that in Victorian literature generally geometry tends to crop up in moments of sexual maturation "to signify the clarity and order of the presexual mind which must be lost or renounced if maturity is to be reached" ("George Eliot" 83).⁷⁴ As she points out, within the Victorian

⁷³ In 1866 an article in *All the Year Round* described the phenomenon as follows: "In imagining the ultimate composition of a solid body, we have to reconcile two apparently contradictory conditions. It is an assemblage of atoms which do not touch each other—for we are obliged to admit intermolecular spaces—and yet those atoms are held together in clusters by so strong a force of cohesion as to give the whole the qualities of a solid" ("Atoms" 236).

⁷⁴ Eliot attended Francis Newman's lectures on geometry at the Ladies College in January of 1851 (Jenkins, "George Eliot" 73). Frustrated with geometric traditionalism, Newman argued that the field should move forward from Euclid's "unbending" theories (Newman qtd. in Jenkins, "George Eliot" 80).

education system, the study of Euclid (a staple in the narrow curriculum for boys) often coincided with puberty—a fact that might explain why geometrical metaphors often contrast mathematical certainty with the murkiness and ambiguity of sexual adulthood (83). Along these lines, the description of Dorothea as a woman who “could be hardly less complicated than the revolutions of an irregular solid” could also be read as a reference to the increasing complexity of Dorothea as an adult woman. Indeed, both here as well as in the aforementioned passage, Dorothea’s womanhood is the thing of complexity.

But let us further unpack Eliot’s multidimensional phrase. As I will suggest, Eliot uses the rigid structure of hard matter to address mathematical problems of description. A regular solid is a polyhedron (or three-dimensional figure), the faces of which are all identical regular polygons (Figure 1). The number of faces that meet at each corner is

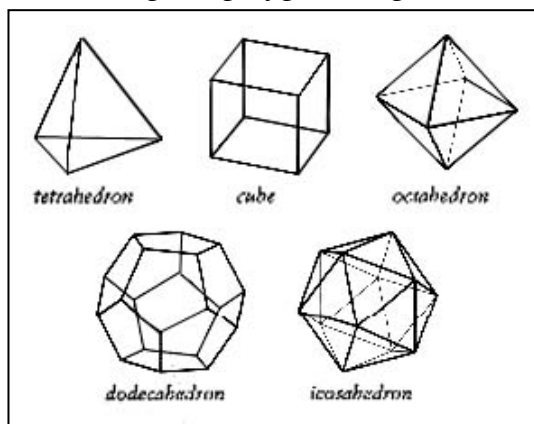


Figure 1: The Five Regular Solids

also the same. A regular solid is easily described in basic terms—by measuring, say, the length of a side of a cube. An irregular solid, on the other hand, is defined precisely by the difficulty one encounters in mathematically *describing* it. Because of their complex shape, irregular solids pose a problem for mathematic description; to

calculate such a body in motion would require finding its moments of inertia—which in the case of an irregular solid would be a real challenge without the aid of a computer. In this brief description of Dorothea as more “complicated than the revolutions of an irregular solid,” I want to suggest, not only does Eliot describe Dorothea’s opacity to Brooke, she also gestures toward the difficulty of describing her.

In the history of mechanics, the rotation of tops is a classic problem, with only three known cases of solved integrable systems.⁷⁵ In 1857 Scottish physicist James Clerk Maxwell suggested that the “problem of the rotation of a solid body” was so difficult “that it had never been thoroughly understood by any but the most expert mathematicians” (Maxwell 249). Such difficulty did not stop Maxwell, of course—the

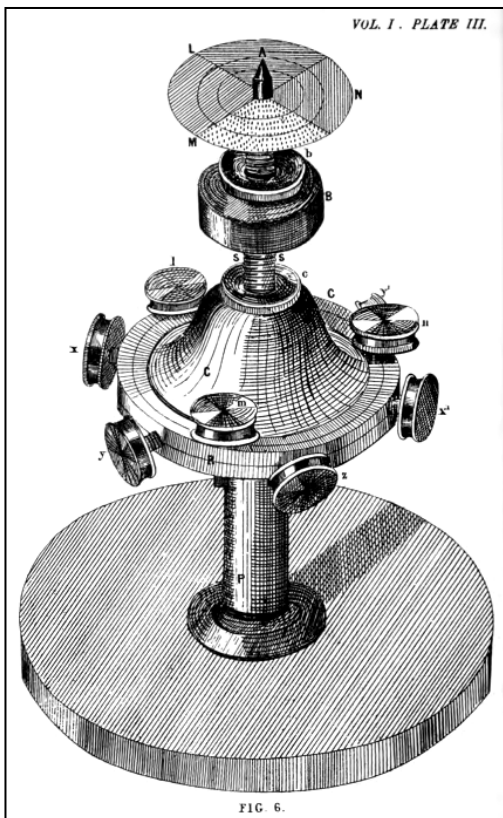


Figure 2: Maxwell's Dynamical Top

physicist who would go on formulate classical electromagnetic theory. By age 26 he had created a “dynamical top” that validated his calculations of the dynamics of a rotating solid body (Figure 2). The creation of the dynamical top had followed on the heels of his groundbreaking work on Saturn’s rings. As Maxwell showed in 1856, the rings of Saturn were neither solid nor fluid, as others had suggested. Rather, they were a rotating mass of *irregular solid* particles. His prize-winning paper, “On the Stability of the Motion of Saturn’s Rings” (1856) demonstrated the following hypothesis: that the “theory of an

Irregular Solid Ring leads to the result that to ensure stability the irregularity must be enormous” (289). In other words, what appeared to be the stable, concentric circles of Saturn’s rings were really the strange and distant motions of irregular particles.

John Bender has suggested that the realist novel is “apparitional” in its “the capacity ... to give us the impression of real things—to use means other than direct,

⁷⁵ The Lagrange, Euler and Kovalevskaya tops.

sensory apprehension of the real in order to project a reality” (104). Likewise, one might read Eliot’s realistic characters as performing something like Saturn’s rings: her characters might appear like persons with psychological qualities, but they actually complex material systems, concatenations of words that whirr and spin to produce the effect of human life. But Eliot’s realism, I want to suggest, rests on yet a deeper analogy with physics, one in which her novel, like complex formulae, works to depict the form and motion of human life. Both fluids and rotating, solid bodies, of course, are incredibly difficult to describe or predict without the aid of higher-order mathematics, as Maxwell himself points out. Like Maxwell, Eliot’s narrator often impresses upon his audience the difficulties of describing such a complex character as Dorothea before moving on to describe her all the same. As I will argue in closing, Eliot’s descriptive strategy for Dorothea works like this: it creates Dorothea as being too complex, too lively and reactive, to capture within the frame of the narrative.

“Who can all at once describe a human being?” Eliot’s narrator in *Daniel Deronda* (1876) wonders, “Even when he is presented to us we only begin that knowledge of his appearance which must be completed by innumerable impressions under differing circumstances” (160). One might respond to Eliot’s narrator that fiction does not *describe* humans—at least not specific ones—it *creates* characters out of the stuff of life. But Eliot’s descriptive strategy in *Middlemarch* entails acting *as if* one were describing a real person (and not constructing a fictional one). Rendering apparent the “character-space” of the novel—the name Alex Woloch gives to the intersection of an implied human personality with the limited space of the narrative—Eliot bestows Dorothea with an extra-textual life implicitly difficult to describe (13).

In one of the earliest descriptions of Dorothea in the novel, Eliot creates a sense of Dorothea’s extra-textual form and extension by performing a kind of descriptive bait and

switch. The passage begins with a description of the young girl as she runs out across the park in bonnet and shawl after an exciting first dinner with her future husband. We are given a description of Dorothea's face and dress, of "the color rose in her cheeks" and of "her straw bonnet (which our contemporaries might look at with conjectural curiosity as at an obsolete form of basket)" (25). As the passage continues, however, the reader is slowly made aware that there is someone there doing the describing, someone wrestling with which aspects of Dorothea to describe and why. The narrator's words, it is revealed, moreover, are a part of a larger descriptive strategy in which physical details are meant to signal deeper, characterological traits. "She would perhaps be hardly characterized enough," the narrator moves on to explain,

if it were omitted that she wore her brown hair flatly braided and coiled behind so as to expose the outline of her head in a daring manner at a time when public feeling required the meagreness of nature to be dissimulated by tall barricades of frizzed curls and bows, never surpassed by any great race except the Feejeean. This was a trait of Miss Brooke's asceticism.
(25)

Guiding the reader's interpretation of the passage, the narrator explicates the deeper significance of her hairstyle to the unperceptive reader. Presumably, the details of Dorothea's hair could not be omitted because without this information the reader would fail to understand her ascetic quality. This quality had of course already been alluded to in the description of her bonnet as "some obsolete form of basket," but the description of Dorothea's unfashionable hair paired with its direct interpretation as "the trait of Miss Brooke's asceticism" ensures that the reader has gotten the message.

So far the description has unfolded at on a symbolic level in which physical traits are said to signal social meanings. But this significatory system breaks down as the

paragraph ends. Complicating this easy relationship between sign and signified set up in the passage, the next and final line reads:

But there was nothing of an ascetic's expression in her bright full eyes, as she looked before her, not consciously seeing, but absorbing into the intensity of her mood, the solemn glory of the afternoon with its long swathes of light between the far-off rows of limes, whose shadows touched each other. (25)

Not only is the description of Dorothea as ascetic called into question, but the descriptive framework of the passage is overturned. As scholars have shown, within *Middlemarch*, generalizations often do not apply to Dorothea, whose being, it is implied, is too unique and particular to exemplify a type.⁷⁶ But, the “reality effect” of this passage cannot be attributed solely to the irreducibility of Dorothea to a type. Rather, it inheres in the careful description of her body's interaction with its environment, the way that her eyes “absorb into the intensity of her mood” the “long swathes of light” and “shadows” made by the lime trees. These eyes—which do not see, but simply absorb the force of their surroundings—disrupt the mode of characterization initially established in the passage, a framework, we now realize, set up only to allow Dorothea's living and non-symbolic body to emerge in contrast to it.

Throughout *Middlemarch*, Dorothea's vibrant, material existence interrupts attempts to classify, label, and signify. Her being is too complex, too reactive and unstable to calculate. Underestimating Dorothea's complexity in this regard, Casaubon, it is said, “took a wife, as we have seen, to adorn the remaining quadrant of his course, and

⁷⁶ Isobel Armstrong has argued that Eliot “subtracts from Dorothea's situation what is common, what can be recognized, and then goes on to describe what is not, the things which make her situation unique and pitiable” (128). Likewise, Gallagher argues that Dorothea “comes to occupy a series of subcategories, each of which is in turn experienced as restrictive, artificial and plot-disrupting” (68-9).

be a little moon that would cause hardly a calculable perturbation” (87). But while Dorothea’s existence is incalculable, as the final lines of the novel remind us, this is not because it is small or insignificant. *Middlemarch* famously ends by affirming that “the effect of her being on those around her was incalculably diffusive” (785). With connotations of the sprawling and vague, the abstract and unformed, the word “diffusive,” can also mean “difficult to understand or obscure” (“Diffusive Adj6”). In physics and chemistry, moreover, “diffusion” is the process by which molecules intermingle due to their kinetic energy. If one dissolves small particles into a fluid, for instance, the molecules of both substances will mix due to Brownian motion, irregular molecular movements that take place over small distances—a phenomenon to which, as we have already seen, *Middlemarch* elsewhere makes explicit reference. Thus, by the time the reader has reached the novel’s final lines, Dorothea’s solidity seems to have dissolved into the loose molecular structure of a liquid in which everything is in motion. Her “nature” is described as a “river” having “spent itself in channels,” implying a connection between her dynamic form and her high capacity for relation (785). It does not matter, we are told, that these channels “had no great name on earth;” what matters is rather “the effect of her being on those around her” (785).

Martha Nussbaum has lamented that the ending of *Middlemarch* is “extremely and frustratingly vague,” seeming to “parry the supposed claims of realism to presence, solidity” (*Subversion* 303). Indeed, however, as I have been arguing, Eliot’s investment in the rigid crystalline structure of solids is in fact limited. The indefinite and indeterminate in structure are much more fundamental to her mode of realist description. In the famous “Prelude” to the novel, the significance of such “indefiniteness” is alluded to upon the announcement that *Middlemarch* will narrate nothing so “coherent” as an “epic life,” but will rather tarry with lives characterized by “inconsistency and

formlessness” (3-4). In an important article on character in *Middlemarch*, Catherine Gallagher has stressed the importance of the “Prelude” for understanding Eliot’s mode of characterization. According to Gallagher, just as Dorothea fails to achieve the epic life destined for the category of women referred to as “Therasas,” Eliot’s characters all fail to represent the type they are supposed to exemplify; they are too particular, distinct and real to be reduced to a type. Brooke’s glutinousness, in Gallagher’s interpretation, is thus a reminder “that Mr. Brooke was precipitated out of a nebulous viscous element (the type)” —a type his character will in every way exceed (“George” 63). For my part, however, I want to suggest that what is so distinct about Eliot’s characters is not their ability to exceed the type, but rather their tendency toward vagueness and formlessness in the face of generic novelistic shifts toward particularity and representationalism.

Middlemarch, as I pointed out at the start of this paper, is often upheld as the paragon of a novelistic paradigm in which characterization corresponds to the representation of subjectivity. By contrast, what I have been tracking is a mode of description in which characters appear, to quote Stephen Arata, as “materializations of human subjectivity, not their equivalent” (“The Impersonal Intimacy of Marius the Epicurian” 132). This does not mean that there are not aspects of *Middlemarch* that conform to the narrative of the emergence of literary characters as an “original, discriminated, and individual person[s]” (Scott, *Lives* 549). Rather, I have simply highlighted moments in Eliot’s novel in which this transition is resisted or complicated.

Where humans express and accrete particular traits and habits due to structural changes in the plastic matter from which their character emerges, literary characters are much looser structures capable of rapidly taking on new forms. This is perhaps why in letter to a friend in 1843 (long before she would try her hand as a novelist) Eliot describes a man named “Mr. Henslowe” as “evidently a character made up of natural crystallization

instead of one turned out of a mould” (“To Miss Maria Lewis” 98). In contrast to Eliot’s character Brooke, who “will run into any mould,” this actual person—perhaps John Henslow, the botanist who recommended the young Charles Darwin to sail on the HMS *Beagle*—emerges uniquely through a gradual process of precipitation or growth. But Brooke, importantly, is not exactly Henslowe’s structural opposite. (Had Brooke *emerged from* a mold, we might characterize their difference as one of type/instance). Instead, the difference between these two characters inheres more subtly in the *tempo* and *logic* according which they attain form: where Henslowe emerges according to the logic of crystallization, Brooke remains open to an infinite number of reconfigurations. This responsive quality of literary characters might have something to do what Eliot’s narrator calls the “liquid flexibility” of words (510). Comprised of loosely spaced, affective units, all characters, we might aver in closing, are reactive, fluid formations capable of taking on various shapes. As a result, of course, characters often *appear* like humans. But to approach characters *as* humans, I hope to have shown, ultimately speaks less to their matter than the molds we approach them with.

CHAPTER THREE:

Eliot's Natural History of Character: The Descriptive Challenge of *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*

“Will not a tiny speck very close to our vision blot out the glory of the world, and leave only a margin by which we see the blot?” asks the narrator of *Middlemarch* (1871–72).⁷⁷ Indeed it will, comes the answer, and in this regard there is “no speck so troublesome as self” (392). Metaphors of sensory failure in Eliot seem to capture the self-absorption of characters who discount empirical knowledge in favor of their own straitened worldviews. In *Middlemarch* Casaubon’s shortsightedness is tied to his egocentric attempts to “understand the higher inward life” (21). Dorothea, who marries Casaubon in an effort to attain this kind of understanding, is correspondingly “unable to see” the right conclusion (29), can “never see what is quite plain” (34), “does not see things” (52), and is “no judge” of visual art, which is composed in “a language [she does] not understand” (73).

When Eliot describes obstacles to sensation, however, she does more than provide a critique of egoism in which the corrective is sympathetic exchange. More basically, Eliot’s fascination with the limits of perception points to an issue of increasing philosophical concern in her late work: that each being’s faculties illuminate but a sliver of the world, leaving vast swaths of the universe dark and unfelt. What would it feel like to step outside the human subject, to look on the world with an extrahuman range of faculties? “[I]t would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat, and we should die of that roar which lies on the other side of silence” (*Middlemarch* 182). To have “a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life,” the narrator of *Middlemarch* suggests in this oft-cited passage, would be to sense what a human being cannot sense, to

⁷⁷ This chapter was originally published as “‘The Natural History of My Inward Self’: Sensing Character in George Eliot’s *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*” *PMLA* 129.1 (2014): 35–51. Print.

feel more than the human body allows one to feel (182).⁷⁸ This chapter proceeds from a literal interpretation of this fantastical line, tracking from here Eliot's interest in literature as a mode of enhanced sensation.⁷⁹ This interest, as we shall see, would culminate in her last published work, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such* (1879), a text much neglected in Eliot scholarship.⁸⁰ Although typically dismissed as inaccessible and overly allusive, this collection of character sketches and philosophical essays provides important insights into Eliot's concern with the limits of human perception and the relation of this problematic to her developing realist aesthetic. To have "a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life," Eliot implies in her final work, entails treating the human being not as a *subject* to which the author has special access but as a new kind of sensible *object*—a dense and complex material body like any other.

In the last chapter, I showed how Eliot's character descriptions developed a vocabulary for the plasticity of character, pushing back against the interiorized novelistic subject so often attributed to her. Highlighting her attention to the impersonal forces at work in character formation, I showed how, on the level of its descriptions, *Middlemarch* resists a too-easy alignment of character with individual human psychology. This chapter builds upon this analysis by continuing to critically examine the portrait of Eliot as a psychological novelist whose "sympathetic ethics" rests on a deep or humanistic approach to character. In turning from *Middlemarch* to *Impressions*, however, my

⁷⁸ This trope first appears in Eliot's novella *The Lifted Veil* (1859), in which her protagonist's ability to "participat[e] in other people's consciousnesses" is compared to his having "a preternaturally heightened sense of hearing, making audible to one a roar of sound where others find perfect stillness" (15, 18). For a powerful reading of this passage attentive to Eliot's curiosity about sensory expansion, see Hertz 39–41.

⁷⁹ Here I follow the lead of a recent wave of scholarship exploring how Victorians conceived the effect of reading on the sensorium (esp. Dames; Ablow).

⁸⁰ Even since Nancy Henry's pathbreaking edition from 1994, *Impressions* has attracted little scholarly attention. Given the book's robust engagement with Victorian natural-historical, biological, and psychological discourse, it is especially disappointing to discover its absence from book-length studies of Eliot and science (e.g., Shuttleworth; Davis).

argument will take a different tack. Rather than focusing on how specific characterological bodies are constructed and described, I show how, in taking up the more taxonomical frame of natural history, Eliot's final work employs description not only to *zoom in*, but to *zoom out* on the human species, situating humans in ecological relation to a plurality of other life forms.

Eliot has of course long been read in support of the claim that literature inspires moral action by portraying characters as "containing a rich inner life," the hidden contents of which are essential to "defining a creature as fully human" (Nussbaum, 90). While I admit Eliot's concern with the value and agency of human beings, however, my reading of her late-career sketches in this chapter pushes against the humanist interpretation of Eliot in two ways. First, I suggest that her late-career turn to the typological tradition of the character sketch asserts a critical distance from what Heather Love calls "the traditional humanist categories of experience, consciousness, and motivation" that ground the modern notion of character. If we can distill a literary ethics in Eliot's final work, I argue, it is an ethics, to cite Love's distinction, "grounded in documentation and description, rather than empathy and witness" ("Close But Not Deep" 375). As we shall see, Eliot's naturalistic investment in describing people in terms of the characterological traits they share with nonhuman animals calls into question the human exceptionalism of novelistic modes of characterization. Rather than craft characters as uniquely psychological beings, her sketches put them on the same plane as other creatures; like fish, sea lions, or even microscopic vorticellae, human beings are conditioned by bodily frameworks and habitual responses that allow them to sense and experience some things and not others.

Second, by taking inspiration from Love's postulation that literature might account for the variation and complexity of life, as well as for its richness and depth, I

highlight Eliot's interest in literature not only as a medium for intersubjective understanding but also as an amplificatory technology, a tool for the sensation of multifarious realities. "How many conceptions & fashions of life have existed to which our understanding & sympathy have no clue!" Eliot writes in a notebook dated to the 1870s (qtd. in Collins 390).⁸¹ Her task in *Impressions* is not to penetrate the depths of the human psyche but rather to sketch a vast characterological landscape, to put humanity into perspective by zooming out until the human being appears as a speck in an array of sensitive life-forms. Situating Eliot's 1879 sketches and essays in a longer history of the character sketch, a history beginning with the ancient Greek naturalist and sketch writer Theophrastus of Eresus, I show how the observation-based methodology Eliot develops in her mature work draws on her longtime interest in the practice of natural history. In aligning *Impressions* with the descriptive traditions of natural history and the character sketch, I argue, Eliot puts pressure on the modern association of character with individual human psychology.

THEOPHRASTUS WHO?

Impressions of Theophrastus Such chronicles the attempts of a curmudgeonly London bachelor named Theophrastus to catalog and describe members of the human genus in order to better understand the species to which he belongs. Eliot's Theophrastus calls his project "the natural history of my inward self," a phrase that brings into strange harmony the expansive, outward-oriented practice of natural-historical description and the inward-oriented quest for self-knowledge characteristic of novelistic narrative (104). This character-narrator's path to self-knowledge leads, however, not inward to the self

⁸¹ In this late notebook Eliot calls for further exploration of the nonhuman and nonlinguistic worlds: "we are the better off for knowing better the nature of fishes & storms & acting according to that knowledge" (qtd. in Collins 392).

but rather outward; it entails describing the members of one's own species to discern "the figure the human genus makes in the specimen which I myself furnish" (104). Amassing descriptions of various unperceptive and unsympathetic human beings, many of whom are writers like him, Theophrastus tries to illuminate that which escapes his embodied awareness: the form of the species of which he is but an instance. Through his sketches we meet characters such as Touchwood, whose touchy temper repeatedly interrupts his quest for knowledge (56-62); Merman, a comparative historian who drives his career into the ground by forgoing historical accuracy to maintain his pride (28-40); and Spike, the "political molecule" who, having none of his own opinions, votes always unwaveringly for "Progress" (63-66).

Attentive to the prominent and distinctive qualities of people, Theophrastus's character descriptions echo those of the historical Theophrastus, the ancient Greek whose *Characters* (c. 322–317 BCE) is considered the first attempt at systematic character description.⁸² Like the sketches of this other Theophrastus (to which I will return), Eliot's sketches try to record aspects of human character that impress themselves upon the senses. These sketches thus inhabit the latter side of a distinction Eliot once made between "'psychological' novels (very excellent things in their way)" and works that provide "genuine description of external nature ... flowing from spontaneous observation" (Rev. 288). In *Impressions* persons are not uniquely conscious or willful subjects but dense material formations, nonhuman organisms such as touchwood or vorticella—namesakes of characters I unpack as the essay unfolds.

In rendering character sensible, of course, *Impressions* risks the biological

⁸² Eliot had considered titling her book *Characters and Characteristics: Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, a more direct reference to the ancient text (Henry, Introd. xxxvi, f11). The most recent English translation of *Characters* at the time of *Impressions*'s composition was by Richard Jebb (1870), whom Eliot met five years before she began work on *Impressions* (Millett 122n3).

essentialism of Victorian pseudosciences that sought to correlate physical traits with moral or psychological ones. Physiognomy and phrenology, for instance, like other nineteenth-century epistemologies that linked the visible with the invisible, imagined one could read surfaces for their deep, characterological meaning. Unlike such discourses of character, however, *Impressions* stays on the surface of the body, implying that the feel of a person's character is significant and deserves to be examined. In his first chapter Theophrastus makes clear his disdain for physiognomic logic. Although he believes that "direct perceptive judgment is not to be argued against," he critiques the tendency of observers to make correlations between a person's "physical points" and "mental" ones: "With all the increasing uncertainty which modern progress has thrown over the relations of mind and body, it seems tolerably clear that wit cannot be seated in the upper lip, and that the balance of the haunches in walking has nothing to do with the subtle discrimination of ideas" (7). As a rule, Eliot's novels warn against forms of knowledge that situate a "key to all mythologies" in symbolic systems of the visible and invisible.⁸³ Instead of seeing character as a static signified to which "physical points" can be correlated, Eliot indicates that "character is not cut in marble—it is not something solid and unalterable. It is living and changing" (*Middlemarch* 694). It inheres in the body, but like the body "character is a process and an unfolding"; it grows, heals, and deteriorates (140).

At the same time, character is not something one can change at will or easily develop through practices of self-making, or *Bildung*. *Impressions* elucidates an unexamined tension between Eliot's understanding of character and the liberal discourses of self-making concerned with "the self-reflective cultivation of character," to use

⁸³ In *Middlemarch* the "Key to All Mythologies" is Casaubon's unfinished magnum opus.

Amanda Anderson's phrase (*Powers* 4). In *Impressions*—as well as at other critical moments throughout Eliot's corpus—character sticks in the living body and in its interactions, not in its intentions. It inheres in the subject's position in space and time, in the fact that one has an embodied perspective and cannot but look out of it. It is neither voluntary nor essential; rather, it unfolds according to the same logic and temporality afforded to bodies.

Indeed, Theophrastus's failed attempts to look inward, to know his character so that he might transcend or correct it, demonstrate the impossibility of shaking one's embodied perspective. In the book's first chapter, "Looking Inward," Theophrastus expresses a frustrated desire to overcome his character, a desire akin to the wish to have one's "squint or other ocular defect" corrected with spectacles (9). Lamenting the impossibility of remedying his "inward squint," he continues, "Perhaps I have made self-betraysals enough already to show that I have not arrived at that non-human independence. My conversational reticences about myself turn into garrulousness on paper—as the sea-lion plunges and swims the more energetically because his limbs are of a sort to make him shambling on land" (12). Here we find another metaphor of sensory failure of the sort with which I began, another suggestion that the self somehow "blots out" the world as a result of an egoism figured as a defect of vision. Literary scholars have tended to read Eliot's fascination with perceptive limits in terms of what the historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison have called the "moralization of objectivity" in the late nineteenth century (81): the tendency of nineteenth-century scientists to equate objectivity with ideals of self-abnegation or self-restraint (Levine, *Dying* 171-199; Garratt 27-37). Yet to read Eliot's concern with the failures of human perception under this purely epistemological rubric risks reducing her affective vision to one in which the central problem is human access to a nonhuman natural world. To the contrary,

Impressions refuses the anthropocentrism of modern epistemology and its focus on the singularity of the human knower. While I agree with George Levine that for Eliot “personality is an obstruction to perception,” I want to stress that both human and nonhuman personalities provide such obstacles (“George” 1).

Aligning human observers with nonhuman observers and actors, *Impressions* treats the problem of embodiment as a (species-specific) universal. Theophrastus’s observations result in what might be read as a more basic and open-ended claim that a structure of sight and blindness is inherent to all sensitive bodies. Consider the above passage in which Theophrastus describes the correction of his “inward squint” as the achievement of a certain “non-human independence.” He yearns to experience the world not from an objective or God’s-eye view but from a nonhuman perspective, a perspective merely different from his all-too-human one. As Theophrastus reminds us, the body of the sea lion, while perfect for swimming, renders him “shambling on land.” The materiality of the sea lion’s body limits his ambulatory capacity. Similarly, Theophrastus cannot overcome the limits of his humanity and the gaps in perception and sensation that frustrate his writerly existence. Like the sea lion, whose frustration on land inspires him to swim with vigor, however, Theophrastus will put pen vigorously to paper, finding the extension of his experience in the affective medium of the text.

In a notebook passage thought to have been composed around 1874, Eliot turns to a German proverb to explicate a similar notion. ““Es ist dafür gesorgt [sic] dass die Bäume nicht in den Himmel wachsen,”” she writes, adding “in other words, everything on this Earth has its limits which may not be overpassed” (qtd. in Collins 387). This quotation (the epigraph to Part III of Goethe’s *Autobiography*) translates as “it has been arranged that trees do not grow into the sky” (my trans.). While many of Eliot’s contemporaries might have placed humankind in the sky in this schema, thereby

contrasting the infinite potential of humanity to the limited nature of nonhuman life, Eliot extends this proverb to capture the limits of the human, arguing that “a being like man, having a certain shape, certain modes of movement, certain forms of movement sense, & certain unchangeable wants must continue to be determined & limited by these in all his invention” (qtd. in Collins 387–88). In Eliot’s *scala naturae*, human beings are no more exempt from limits imposed by nature than any other creature. They have great potential, yes, but they have bodies, forms, sense capacities, modes of desiring and moving.

DESCRIPTIVE MINUTIAE

That Eliot names her protagonist after the ancient Greek naturalist Theophrastus of Eresus (c. 371–287 BCE) situates *Impressions* in a lineage of natural-historical practices that begins in the fourth century BCE. Her explicit and implicit references to practices of species identification tie the text to the long history of biological classification and taxonomic ranking that has allowed scientists to understand the phylogenetic interrelation of life-forms. Around 335 BCE Theophrastus, a student and friend of Aristotle, helped him found the Peripatetic school in Athens’s Lyceum—the school that instigated the shift in Greek philosophy away from Plato’s theory of forms and toward a mode that more highly valued sense experience as a foundation of knowledge. Sensation and affect played crucial roles in Theophrastus’s philosophy, as can be seen most clearly in his treatise *On Sensation* (Baltussen 71-94). In his best-known work, the *Characters*, he applies the Peripatetic methodology to the study of human behavior, producing the first systematic attempt at character description.

Theophrastus also wrote treatises on stones and on ethics, and he is said to have inaugurated the field of botany in the West with his many detailed studies of plants (Sharples 126-7). Like his colleague Aristotle, whom he succeeded as head of the

Peripatetic school, he composed an array of philosophical and naturalistic studies based on careful observations of the natural world. The two friends' approaches to the organization of this world differed, however. Where in Aristotle's ordered universe the base and the monstrous are deviations from ideals, in Theophrastus's *Metaphysics* baseness and monstrosity are the rule, and harmony and beauty are exceptions. Likewise, the *Characters* focuses on ignorance and other negative aspects of human life, describing such types as the thankless man, the coward, and the bore. In Theophrastus's philosophy this relegation of the noble and the ignoble to the same ontological plane comprehends the relation of the human to the nonhuman. Instead of according the human a special or high place in the natural order, he grants people, rocks, and trees the same ontological status.⁸⁴

Eliot's Theophrastus is also interested in exploring lateral rather than hierarchical relations between forms of life. Characters crystallize in descriptions, thick with zoological reference, that draw parallels between human and nonhuman behavior. The character Merman, a scholar who reacts aggressively when his arguments are challenged, is said to resemble a walrus, which, "though not in the least a malignant animal, if allowed to display its remarkably plain person and blundering performances at ease in any element it chooses, becomes desperately savage and musters alarming auxiliaries when attacked or hurt" (34). Another writer character, Vorticella, recalls the parasitic single-cell organisms called vorticellae, which encase themselves in a cystic covering to reproduce. Dismissing all criticism of her writing, Vorticella allows vanity to overtake her like a "polypus, tumour, fungus, or other erratic outgrowth, noxious and disfiguring in its effect on the individual organism that nourishes it" (126). Consumed by the success of her only book, she brings it up at every possible moment, driving away her company to

⁸⁴ On the decentered position of the human in Theophrastus's philosophy, Hughes; Cole.

live the life of solitude to which her name seems to have destined her. In a recent article on the zoophyte in Victorian natural history, Danielle Coriale has suggested that the polyp “resisted, repulsed, or confused sympathetic attachment, human identification, and intelligibility in the Victorian imagination” (19). Consistent with this view, Eliot uses the vorticella to portray an unsympathetic, gothic character, self-absorbed and self-enveloping.

Readers of *Middlemarch* will remember that the vorticella is a favorite figure for Eliot. It crops up in that novel in a parable that, like the sketch form, grants priority to the minutiae of everyday experience over the drama of narrative action. In *Middlemarch* Eliot attends to the characteristic of the vorticella from which its name derives: the vortex formed in its mouth through the simultaneous beating of the small hairs, called cilia, that surround the oral cavity:

Even with a microscope directed on a water-drop we find ourselves making interpretations which turn out to be rather coarse; for whereas under a weak lens you may seem to see a creature exhibiting an active voracity into which other smaller creatures actively play as if they were so many animated tax-pennies, a stronger lens reveals to you certain tiniest hairlets which make vortices for these victims while the swallower waits passively at his receipt of custom. (55)

This parable serves to explain the actions of Mrs. Cadwallader, whose attempts at matchmaking, the narrator implies, might at first appear like the workings of some masterly and premeditated plot. On closer inspection, however, one will find that her actions stem not from “any ingenious plot, any hide-and-seek course of action,” but rather from “a play of minute causes producing what may be called thought and speech vortices to bring her the sort of food she needed” (55).

Scholars have typically understood this passage to comment on the interpretive nature of knowledge. But it does something else too: it places human and nonhuman organisms on the same plane as a strategy to describe human behavior as no more rational or intentional than that of other organisms. What might appear to be the willing actions of a subject are shown to be the passive compulsions of a hungry animal. “Thought and speech”—ostensibly characteristic of human behavior—are reduced to a “play of minute causes” like those that allow the lowly vorticella to eat. Eliot’s language in this passage echoes that of her longtime partner, George Henry Lewes, whose discussion of the vorticella in his *Studies in Animal Life* (1860, 1862) begins with a call for a more sustained study of life’s “minuter or obscurer forms” (3).⁸⁵ *Impressions* puts what Lewes called the “Philosophy of the infinitely little” into literary practice, looking to the sketch form in order to render visible the microscopic (*Studies* 1). If plot, as Eliot suggests in *Middlemarch*, is the “telescopic watch” that fails to register the subtle motivations of folks like Mrs. Cadwallader, description is the microscope (55).

TO SKETCH A SPECIES

By the time Eliot turned to the descriptive genre of the character sketch at the end of the nineteenth century, the Theophrastan sketch had long since seen its heyday. The ancient Theophrastus’s *Characters* had been made famous by a 1592 Latin translation by Isaac Casaubon—a name familiar to Eliot readers, to be sure—which inspired a surge of imitations throughout the seventeenth century.⁸⁶ Undoubtedly the most popular was Jean

⁸⁵ Vorticellae also appear in Lewes’s *Sea-side Studies* (56) as well as his essay “Only a Pond!” (597), as Henry, “George Eliot” 47-51 and Wormald 501, 516-17, discuss in greater detail.

⁸⁶ According to Haight, Eliot was familiar with Isaac Casaubon and “knew his fine edition of Theophrastus’s *Characteres*” (448). In *Middlemarch*, when Casaubon becomes ill the town doctor prescribes him two novels with clear connections to the Theophrastan tradition by the eighteenth-century writer Tobias Smollett, *The Adventures of Roderick Random* (1748) and *The Expedition of Humphry Clinker* (1771) (269).

de La Bruyère's *Les caractères, ou les mœurs de ce siècle* (1688), which went through eight editions in six years and to which *Impressions* refers.⁸⁷

Scholars of the novel have long suggested that the character sketch's "flat" portraits of ethical and social types were replaced by the "round" and individualized characters of the novel.⁸⁸ In *The Economy of Character* (1998), however, Deidre Lynch reframes this history, directing our attention to a different set of terms. In Lynch's history, as character stretched further across the axis of plot, it cleaved from the surface and materiality of the body, becoming an "inner" as opposed to an "outer" quality. It was not until the late eighteenth century, she contends, when the expanded market for printed matter facilitated new strategies for distinguishing public from private personas, that character came to be understood as something deep and hidden. According to Lynch the novel was "founded on the promise that it was this type of writing that tendered the deepest, truest knowledge of character" (28). But the production of characters with private interiors was not always the aim of fiction, nor would it necessarily continue to be, even in the hands of novelists like Eliot.

Building on Lynch's innovative approach to the history of character, I want to suggest that *Impressions* marks a unique moment in character's historical dialogue with depth and surfaces. Here in 1879 character seems almost anachronistically apparent; rather than a hidden or buried kernel of personality or moral fiber, it is a surface phenomenon produced through a dialogue between outward observations and inward beliefs. The chapter "So Young!" highlights the role that outside forces have in the production of a character named Ganymede, an aging dandy who continues to believe

⁸⁷ Shaftsbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) is also an important referent here.

⁸⁸ According to Forster, "round" characters are three-dimensional, develop and change, and are original and individual, while "flat" characters are two-dimensional, remain the same, and are mere types (67).

himself “girlishly handsome” despite having grown older and less attractive (101).⁸⁹ Ganymede’s self-delusion occurs when “outward confirmations” of his youth uttered during his boyhood come to form the basis of his “habitual inward persuasion” (103); “being strongly mirrored for himself in the remark of others,” Theophrastus explains, Ganymede “was getting to see his real characteristics as a dramatic part, a type to which his doings were always in correspondence” (100). Instead of typing Ganymede by interpreting his behaviors to signal some kind of characterological essence, Eliot suggests that he performs his identity *in reference to* a type. Ganymede, importantly, is not an invert—he just believes it a “disturbing inversion of the natural order that any one very near to him should have been younger than he” (103).⁹⁰

And yet, while Eliot does not suggest that types are prefigured or inherent, the concept of the type plays an important role in *Impressions*. In this the text could be said to recall the aims of eighteenth-century sketch writers who “described not men, but manners, not an individual but a species” (Fielding 189) more than those of nineteenth-century authors, many of whom saw themselves as producing “original, discriminated, and individual person[s]” (Scott 514). Indeed, the book’s title, *Impressions of Theophrastus Such*, puts it in conversation with this older, typological model of characterization by echoing the original Theophrastus’s ancient sketches, each of which begins with the formula “Such a type who ...” (Henry, Introd. xviii).⁹¹ Still, Eliot’s engagement with ancient and early modern modes of character sketching is more than a backward turn. It is a metacritical commentary on the history of characterization and

⁸⁹ In Greek mythology, Ganymede is the most beautiful of mortals. He is kidnapped and granted eternal youth by Zeus.

⁹⁰ It is uncertain whether the word *inversion* would have carried any queer connotation in 1879. The German sexological term *konträre Sexualempfindung* (from which the English word *inversion* is derived) had been in parlance since 1870.

⁹¹ The Theophrastus scholar, William Fortenbaugh translates the original Greek “Toioutos tis, hoios” to “someone such as to...” (17).

typing itself, one that seems to confront the novel's interest in "character development" with the diffuse and nonlinear descriptive structure of the sketch.⁹²

Impressions explores the "such" of Theophrastus's refrain—the connection between the actions of a person and the type of person who performs them. Like the sketches of the ancient Theophrastus's *Characters*, which describe first an abstraction (complaisance, arrogance, superstition, irony) and then a man exemplifying it, Eliot's sketches often start with a meditation on a behavior, situation, or emotion and turn after a paragraph or so to a human instantiation of the phenomenon she is describing. A sketch of Touchwood, an incendiary type whose name refers to wood that easily catches fire, begins with the question "What is temper?" (56). This sketch, however, quickly moves to consider the role temper plays in our understanding of character itself (something the historical Theophrastus's sketches do not do). Why is temper thought inessential to character whereas other characteristics are thought to be essential parts of personality? Too often, Eliot's narrator remarks,

we hear a man declared to have a bad temper and yet glorified as the possessor of every high quality. When he errs or in any way commits himself, his temper is accused, not his character. ... If he kicks small animals, swears violently at a servant who mistakes orders, or is grossly rude to his wife, it is remarked apologetically that these things mean nothing—they are all temper. (56)

In *Impressions* few things are cast aside as unimportant to sketch writing: all of what one observes should be accounted for in the description of character. While interested in descriptive detail, however, Eliot's final text calls for a typological systematicity in the description of character, complicating the suggestion that her realism eschews typological

⁹² Eliot also began her career with the sketch form, in *Scenes from Clerical Life* (1857, 1858).

thinking for a particularism in which every character appears unique.⁹³

While Eliot herself is hard to type, she was not alone in turning to the character sketch at the fin de siècle. At a time when the triple-decker novel was breathing its last breath and the aesthetic movement was producing slimmer volumes, this “old” mode of character depiction had returned to trouble the transition from plot-driven narrative to the experiments with perspective and sense perception emergent with aestheticism.⁹⁴ In tension with individualized and psychologized notions of character also developing at this time, the late Victorian character sketch (like its many precursors) located character on the surfaces of bodies, clothes, and other observable objects. Unlike the sketches that appeared before them, however, late Victorian sketches tend to focus on the body’s effect on the writing process. In *Human Documents: Character Sketches of Representative Men and Women of the Time* (1895), Arthur Alfred Lynch, for instance, suggests that “man’s intellectual work is determined in great measure by his physical constitution and his emotional quality,” giving examples such as “Byron’s lame foot” and “Carlyle’s dyspepsia” (v). Unlike its predecessors, the late-nineteenth-century character sketch situated character squarely in bodily experience, a move that—like our own “dyspeptic” narrator’s attempt to write the “natural history” of his “inward self”—works through the fraught relation between materiality and subjectivity (89).

THE NATURAL HISTORY OF HUMAN LIFE

Eliot’s own experience of human finitude interrupted her composition of

⁹³ Something implied, e.g., by Armstrong (127-8) and J. Hillis Miller (*Form* 84). On the tension of type and individual in Eliot, see Gallagher.

⁹⁴ See, e.g., Vernon Lee’s *Baldwin: Being Dialogues on Views and Aspirations* (1886) and Walter Pater’s *Imaginary Portraits* (1887). Pater’s conclusion to *Studies in the History of the Renaissance* (1873) is also an important touchstone, tied as his notion of “impressions” is to the “weaving and unweaving of ourselves” (119). On the nineteenth-century sketch form more generally, see Sha; Garcha; Hamilton.

Impressions. In November 1878—nine days after the manuscript had been sent off to her publisher—her partner, George Henry Lewes, died, putting an end to their twenty-four years together. Halting editorial work on *Impressions* until the following year, Eliot set out to complete Lewes’s five-volume magnum opus, *Problems of Life and Mind* (1874–79), the last two volumes of which remained unfinished. When *Impressions* was finally published, it included a prefatory note explaining the delay in publication with reference to the “domestic affliction of the Author” (qtd. in Henry, Introd. xxxvn5).

While finishing Lewes’s treatise in psychology, Eliot enlisted the help of their close friend James Sully, a physiological psychologist and aesthetic theorist who shared with Eliot and Lewes a fascination with the effects of literature on the body. Sully’s 1874 essay collection *Sensation and Intuition: Studies in Psychology and Aesthetics* (owned and read multiple times by Eliot and Lewes) stood at the forefront of research about the physiological effects of reading.⁹⁵ For Sully the literary text was a unique interface in the back-and-forth between inner experiences and external stimulations that constituted consciousness. Character was central to Sully’s literary-theoretical inquiry into the effects of reading, which investigated the aesthetic aspects of human character as well as the capacity of art to reproduce that character in literature—what Sully called “transformed embodiments of character” (284). In his essay “The Representation of Character in Art,” Sully argues that while it is “a tolerably easy matter” to represent in literature such things as thought and speech, the central challenge of fiction is to use words “to suggest to the reader’s mind ... an intricate series of visual and other impressions, such as those conveyed by the person’s figure, dress and outward carriage, by the varying cadences of his voice, and so on.” When properly executed, that is, “the descriptive word” creates

⁹⁵ Lewes’s diary reports that the couple read *Sensation and Intuition* on 12 July 1874 and many times thereafter (Shuttleworth 230n17).

“impressions” triggering memories of previous experiences and their “corresponding sensations.”⁹⁶ Through the activation of dormant feelings and impulses already present in the observer, description directs readers to “partake in the vivid interest of present reality” (285-6). As both Sully and Lewes stressed, the “sensuous medium” of words does more than produce imaginary thought worlds (Sully 284). According to Sully “the *representation* of human character in fiction appears sufficiently real to awaken just the same species of feelings which would be excited by the *presentation* of a similar type of character in real life” (288).

Some twenty years earlier, in her seminal essay “The Natural History of German Life” (1856), Eliot made an argument like Sully’s about the potential of literary description to shuttle one back to the world from which one’s impressions first emerged.⁹⁷ “It is an interesting branch of psychological observation,” Eliot writes, “to note the images that are habitually associated with abstract or collective terms—what may be called the picture-writing of the mind, which it carries on concurrently with the more subtle symbolism of language.” The degree of fixity of the image associated with a given word, Eliot moves on to hypothesize, might be “a tolerably fair test of the amount of concrete knowledge and experience which a given word represents in the minds of two persons who use it with equal familiarity” (107). The vividness of the images conjured in one’s mind speaks to the wealth of experience one has had with the thing described, and the words of a successful description create impressions that recall the world from which they arose. For Eliot, as for Sully, the affective power of the literary text does not induce fantasy; on the contrary, it pulls one back to the textures, densities, and layers of the

⁹⁶ On the historicity of impressions, see Sully (38) and Lewes (*Problems* 101–02). Before Lewes and Sully, the concept of impression had been central to the work of associationists from Hume and Hartley to Bain and Spencer.

⁹⁷ Indeed, Eliot’s work had a major influence on Sully (Ryan, “Reading”).

physical world. As Eliot's Theophrastus puts it, "A fine imagination ... is always based on a keen vision, a keen consciousness of what *is*"; it is an "energy constantly fed by susceptibility to the veriest minutiae of experience" (109–10).

Recent scholarship on Eliot has focused on how the burgeoning mind and brain sciences of the period influenced Eliot's representation of the embodied and adaptive mind (e.g., Ryan, *Thinking*). While early Victorian psychology increasingly localized character in the human brain, however, the science of natural history continued to view character as more dispersed—that is, as the collection of physical qualities and behaviors rendering any organism or species distinct. Scholars who founded the study of Eliot's connections to science have suggested that Eliot turned away from her early interest in the "static science of natural history" to a more narrative and developmental model of scientific knowledge, one that stressed that the deepest truths are initially invisible to the senses and can be discovered only with the imagination (Shuttleworth 22).⁹⁸ In contrast to this work, in which *Impressions* receives little if any attention, I contend that Eliot maintained a profound interest in the observational sciences until the end of her career. Her forays into English tide pools in the 1850s to collect polyps and anemones with Lewes for his *Sea-side Studies* (1856–57, 1858) were just the beginning of a lifelong fascination with the sensuous modes of collection and arrangement that ground natural-historical work.

Much is lost in approaching Eliot's work as a symptom of a large-scale shift in modern science away from the descriptive and inductive practice of natural history and toward the more argumentative and deductive model of modern biology—a narrative that historians of science have shown to be problematic. Natural historians have not only

⁹⁸ Dolin has recently argued that in Eliot's later novels we see the presence of "what scientists called 'hypothetico-deductive' modes, the discovery of what is unknown, and even to the microscope, unknowable, by presenting a hypothesis which can be tested and verified" ("George Eliot" 194).

continued to practice into the twenty-first century, they have also retained the respect of the scientific community, which has relied heavily on their systematic documentation. As Lynn Nyhart has argued in the context of Germany, while modern experimental zoology excluded some of natural history as unscientific, it incorporated major aspects of it into its theory and practice. Although many nineteenth-century zoologists advocated a strictly morphological perspective focused on anatomical form and development, others argued for a zoology that would incorporate natural history's emphasis on systemics, the study of relations between species and their organization in nature. Thus, nineteenth-century biologists like the life-history scientist Karl Theodor Siebold insisted on an observation-based practice that would retain natural history's attentiveness to the network of relations in which organisms participated, including their behaviors, habits, and other readily observable traits. Like the ethologists who followed him, Siebold wondered about his contemporaries' tendency to look only at morphology in their studies of animals: "But where is the observation of the way of life of these animals, why does one learn so little of the activities of those very animals whose [anatomical] organization is known with the utmost precision?" (qtd. in Nyhart 432).

In "The Natural History of German Life," Eliot echoes the life-history scientist's emphasis on observable traits, activities, and ecological relations over morphological structures. Responding to the work of the German sociologist Wilhelm Riehl, she argues for a literary-sociological practice she calls "the Natural History of social bodies," a practice that would depict human interaction through "gradually amassed observations" (131, 127). In this early formulation of her realist aesthetic, Eliot maintains that knowledge of a people derives from the sensory experience required to produce a detailed description rather than from conceptual familiarity with ideals and abstract categories. Not unlike her anthropologist contemporaries, Eliot insists that to understand how a

people lives one needs the experiential knowledge of the naturalist, not the theoretical knowledge of the physicist, chemist, or physiologist. “Just as the most thorough acquaintance with physics, or chemistry, or general physiology will not enable you at once to establish the balance of life in your private vivarium,” she suggests, so too one cannot know or describe a people by theorizing; one must observe and converse with them in person (130–31). Eliot uses Riehl’s observation-based methodology as a springboard for the formulation of a theory of literature. Like Riehl, whose “vivid pictures” of German people rely on empirical rather than conceptual knowledge (Eliot, “Natural History” 134), she advocates a detailed and engaged yet unromantic mode of literary description that would account for the diversity of the human species.

Eliot’s comments here speak to a culture of natural-historical writing more central to the Victorian period than is sometimes recognized in literary studies.⁹⁹ As historians of science have demonstrated, narratives of the “emergence” of experimental biology or the Darwinian “revolution” overlook not only the long history of morphological and evolutionary thought (Secord; Desmond), but also the continued import of observational sciences like natural history to nineteenth-century culture (Nyhart; Ritvo). Amy King has shown how the techniques of close observation developed by natural history resound in the Victorian novel’s attention to detail, its long descriptive passages, and its fascination with nonhuman things.¹⁰⁰ If Darwin’s theory of evolution “provided ‘plots,’” King writes with reference to Gillian Beer’s classic study *Darwin’s Plots* (1983), “natural history continued to model—far beyond its professional demise—descriptive techniques, detail, and interest in describing the small scale and the local that became essential to the realist novel in Britain” (158). Where others novels worked to proliferate descriptive detail,

⁹⁹ Recent work by King and by Coriale has gone some way to correct this.

¹⁰⁰ For more on the particular in Victorian natural history, see Merrill, esp. 64.

however, *Impressions* looks back to the desire of natural-historical writing to disentangle words from things, to let organisms stand naked in their physical being. More than this, in situating the human as an object of natural-historical inquiry, Eliot's final work decenters and dehierarchizes the human within the *scala naturae*. It positions man humbly, as many pioneering naturalists had, "in the class of the animals, which he resembles in everything material" (Buffon qtd. in Sloan 112).¹⁰¹

AFTER THE HUMAN

As *Impressions* implies, science and literature equally might benefit from the power of what Sully called "the descriptive word" to highlight characteristics held in common by seemingly disparate forms of life. How or why study the human in isolation? Why—if we share our being with so many other creatures—should our perspective on the human be solely a human one? For Eliot the human being is not the most important knower or observer, pitted against the unknowing physical being of nonhuman objects of inquiry. Rather, all perceptive beings lie on a single ontological plane. One might experience oneself as a center, but the surface is infinite.

To close, I will unpack one more moment in the literary critique of human-centered ontologies Eliot offers in *Impressions*, one that positions literature as a kind of nonhuman extension of the human body: "a delicate acoustic or optical instrument," as she put it in 1855, "bringing home to our coarser senses what would otherwise be unperceived by us" (Rev. 289). In *Impressions* every character's blind spot consists in an

¹⁰¹ I cannot here do justice to the long and complicated history of the human as an object of natural-historical inquiry or to the many problematic ways in which nineteenth-century anthropologists and biologists cast some persons as *objects* of inquiry and others as scientific *subjects*. On the emergence of a "natural history" of humanity in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, see Sloan, who argues that in the hands of Linnaeus and Buffon "human beings for the first time were arranged, as a taxonomic group, with the rest of organic nature" (118).

overestimation of his or her own perceptive abilities: the belief that he or she sees more or better than other creatures. Pushing this argument about the limit of human knowledge to its extreme, the chapter “Shadows of the Coming Race” tells the story of mechanical automata that “transcend and finally supersede” the human because of their ability to communicate without the “fussy accompaniment of consciousness” (138, 140).¹⁰² These inorganic posthumans evolve out of tools intended to enhance human perception, “micrometers and thermopiles and tasimeters which deal physically with the invisible, the impalpable, and the unimaginable,” such as “a microphone which detects the cadence of the fly’s foot on the ceiling” (138). Undermining the suggestion that consciousness renders human beings superior to other beings, in “Shadows” Eliot playfully imagines an alternative hierarchy of being in which consciousness is a burden rather than a boon.

Structured something like a Platonic dialogue between Theophrastus and his friend Trost, the chapter speculates about a future race of creatures that would “carry on the most elaborate processes as mutely and painlessly as we are now told that the minerals are metamorphosing themselves continually in the dark laboratory of the earth’s crust” (142). The rise of these “steely organisms,” Theophrastus explains to the incredulous Trost, would eventually enable “banishing from the earth’s atmosphere screaming consciousnesses which, in our comparatively clumsy race, make an intolerable noise and fuss to each other about every petty ant-like performance” (138, 139). In this posthuman, postlinguistic world, “changes as delicate and complicated as those of human language” are carried out by “beings who will be blind and deaf as the inmost rock. ... [T]here may be, let us say, mute orations, mute rhapsodies, mute discussions, and no consciousness there even to enjoy the silence” (142).

“Shadows” might be interpreted as a reaction to the “conscious automaton”

¹⁰² The title is a reference to an 1871 novel by Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *The Coming Race*.

debates of the 1870s among Thomas Henry Huxley, Herbert Spencer, William James, and John Elliott Cairnes (Offer).¹⁰³ John Fuerst has read this chapter as a prescient vision of the digital computer, as an imagining of the kinds of symbolic logic that would produce the first forays into artificial-intelligence research (45). Most relevant to our purposes, however, is the radical thought that “Shadows” makes possible through its dalliance with science fiction: Theophrastus’s musings confront us with the possibility of a world in which consciousness is not the precondition for reality, a world in which communication is nothing like human language but instead involves metamorphic, material processes. In ancient Greek χαρακτήρ (*kharaktēr*) refers to the tool for writing as well as the impression made in wax writing tablets. Theophrastus’s words enact this double impression: he writes, and a world hitherto unimaginable is impressed on our senses, for words, ironically, in their materiality can lead us to imagine a world without words as its medium.

Although Eliot’s work is typically aligned with the humanism of an earlier generation of German theorists, elements of the antianthropocentric thinking emergent in Friedrich Nietzsche’s philosophy can be found in *Impressions*. In 1873—five years before Eliot started writing *Impressions*—Nietzsche began his essay “On Truth and Lies in a Non-moral Sense” (published posthumously in 1896) with a fable in which “clever beasts” who invented “knowing” perish after just a short time on earth, taking their consciousnesses with them (114). This fable, Nietzsche writes, is intended to demonstrate “how shadowy and transient, how aimless and arbitrary the human intellect looks within nature.” The same could be said of the fable presented in “Shadows.” Nietzsche’s conscious beasts take their form of consciousness to be the highest and best. However, “if

¹⁰³ Samuel Butler less convincingly read the chapter as a plagiarized section of his novel *Erewhon* (Henkin 97).

we could communicate with the gnat,” Nietzsche writes, “we would learn that he likewise flies through the air with the same solemnity, that he feels the flying center of the universe within himself” (114). Eliot’s story likewise draws attention to egoism as a condition of embodied perception, human or otherwise. Taking “the humble mollusc” as an example, at a different point in *Impressions*, Theophrastus points out that although one might imagine such an insignificant creature “to have a sense of his own exceeding softness and low place in the scale of being,” in reality he is “inwardly objecting to every other grade of solid rather than to himself” (41). As Eliot and Nietzsche demonstrate through powerful analogy, if every being overestimates its role in the *scala naturae*, there may be no reason to think human beings the highest or most intelligent creatures—or even to think human language the most efficient or best mode of communication. Rather, as Nietzsche argues in his essay, language is merely an agreed-on set of norms that erases the differences and particularities of the sensible world.

In the published version of *Impressions*, the dark and dystopian chapter “Shadows” is followed by a more optimistic one, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!,” exploring the role of the nation in a global human society.¹⁰⁴ As the page proofs demonstrate, however, Eliot initially intended “Shadows” to be the final chapter, but it was inexplicably moved to the penultimate position just before publication.¹⁰⁵ Nancy Henry has suggested that Eliot may have backed away from the radical implications of ending with “Shadows.”¹⁰⁶ The possibility of this alternative ending of *Impressions* motivates my closing remarks, which explore whether in “Shadows” Theophrastus

¹⁰⁴ Of all of *Impressions*’s essays, “The Modern Hep! Hep! Hep!” has received the most critical attention. Newton examines the problematic reception of this chapter, often separated from the book and read as a straightforward expression of Eliot’s views on the Jewish question.

¹⁰⁵ In the final page proofs at the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas, Austin, “Shadows” is the last chapter. No comments from Eliot or the editor indicate the impending switch.

¹⁰⁶ As Henry points out, while “Shadows” leaves Theophrastus in “temporary fragmentation,” “‘The Modern Hep’ reconstitutes Theophrastus fully within a community” (Intro. xxxiv).

transforms into a kind of expansive hybrid entity that can peek outside the human perspective and experience the “nonhuman independence” he longed for in chapter 1. When pressed to defend his theory about the end of humanity at the hands of a robotic species, Theophrastus explains to Trost:

[I]t is less easy to you than to me to imagine our race transcended and superseded, since the more energy a being is possessed of, the harder it must be for him to conceive his own death. But I, from the point of view of a reflective carp, can easily imagine myself and my congeners dispensed with in the frame of things and giving way not only to a superior but a vastly different kind of Entity. (140)

In this curious comparison, Theophrastus claims that where Trost’s humanity prevents him from imagining his species’s extinction, Theophrastus is able to see things “from the point of view of a reflective carp.”¹⁰⁷

In nineteenth-century England *carp* might have been read as a reference not only to the fish (“Carp, N1”) but also to the combining form used in botanical discourse to denote the fruit and seed pods of plants (“Carp-, Comb. Form”): as in *hemicarp*, a half-fruit unit, or *mericarp*, a one-seeded unit. The terms *carpos* (fruit) and *pericarpion* (seed), moreover, were coined by none other than Theophrastus of Eresus in an effort to develop a special botanical terminology (Singer 178). What is more, *carp* is reminiscent of Theophrastus’s interest in the negative, the base, and the minor, since *to carp* can of course mean to talk too much or to complain (“Carp, V1”). This pejorative sense is connected to the otherwise neutral definition of *carp* as “discourse” or “the power of speech” itself, more common between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries (“Carp,

¹⁰⁷ In *Middlemarch* Casaubon’s scholarly rival is likewise named Carp, and Carp’s associates are Pike and Tench.

N2"). Theophrastus: fish, word, fruit-bearing plant; carp capable of imagining humanity's extinction. Where the all-too-human Trost cannot conceive of his species's end, his interlocutor, this ghost of a dead philosopher and literary entity, can imagine it and imagine embodying it.

"I try," Eliot wrote to a friend in 1870, "to delight in the sunshine that will be when I shall never see it any more. And I think it is possible for this sort of impersonal life to attain great intensity, possible for us to gain much more independence, than is usually believed, of the small bundle of facts that make our own personality" ("To Mrs. Robert Lytton" 107).¹⁰⁸ By the end of *Impressions*, Theophrastus seems to have gained such independence, to have unwoven his personality to the extent that he begins to feel such intensity, an affective intensity not unlike the extrahuman roar on the other side of silence. His text appears to have achieved, if but momentarily, the state for which Daniel Deronda longs when, in a "half-involuntary identification of himself with the objects he was looking at," he attempts to "shift his centre till his own personality would be no less outside than the landscape" (160). Fascinated by similar remarks across Eliot's oeuvre, George Levine has read Eliot's frustration with the limits of perception in terms of nineteenth-century epistemological narratives of objectivity in which the embodied self is seen as an impediment to knowledge and revelation must thus occur in the "negation of embodiment" (*Dying* 69). Yet to situate Eliot's anxiety about selfhood in this scientific-epistemological frame risks obscuring the affective aims of her literary project as it seeks to render tactile a reality beyond the human and especially human modes of representation.

In the literary-turned-philosophical realism of *Impressions*, we find a curiously

¹⁰⁸ Probably a reference to David Hume's theory of the self as a "bundle or collection of different perceptions" (188).

sensational Eliot, intent on imagining what reality might *feel* like if one could crack through the human vantage point—if, precisely through the “sensuous medium” of words, one might unravel character into mere impressions and affective states. Her frustration with the limits of perception abides in the desire not to transcend or obliterate the body but rather to have more of a body, more sense capacities. We could relate this opening up of the self to the use of prostheses like the microscope or the telescope (two of Eliot’s favorite figures), but the aim of literary description in Eliot’s work, I hope to have shown, has to do less with the production of knowledge than with the production of new modes of feeling and perception, new ways of sensing human beings and the multifarious reality of which they are a part.

This and the previous chapters have emphasized the contributions of late Victorian realists to the longer history of posthumanist thinking about agency, the body, and sensation. For Eliot, as we just have seen, character was not a distinctly human phenomenon, nor was it limited to the operations of consciousness, intention, or thought; rather, it developed and unraveled according material-temporal processes of action and interaction, producing bodies limited in their capacity, but open always to change and transformation. Relatedly, for Schopenhauer’s *New Woman* readers, the difference between a subject and an object—a man motivated to act through his will and a rock motivated to fall by gravity, for example—depends less on an essential difference of nature than the perspective from which such activity is viewed. Stone crops up again in the following chapter; and here again, it is not merely a figure for stasis and stability, but a site of lively transformation and material interaction. Enlarging the temporal frame to explore how qualities are formed across centuries of change, in this chapter, I show how Thomas Hardy explores the slow and iterative temporality of historical bodies in his final novel, *The Well Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament* (1897). Turning from the flat, if

highly differentiated, arrangements of Eliot's natural history of character to Hardy's temporal account of how species transform over generations, I argue that Hardy's last novel marks an important moment in the history of heredity and racial science.

Creating an analogy between the slow transformation of a species and the process of fossil formation, in *The Origin of Species* (1859) Darwin describes how "the accumulation of long-enduring fossiliferous formations" is both slow and irregular given the dependence of fossil formation on the irregular movements of "great masses of sediment" (308). The long and irregular intervals over which cycles of sedimentation take place means that each particular fossil, depending on its location, undergoes its own unique changes, taking on its own unique form. Likewise, members of species, even if they inhabit the same general region, do not all change at the same pace or in the same way. Constantly emerging variations "accumulated through natural selection" are the result of

many complex contingencies,—on the variations being of a beneficial nature, on the freedom of intercrossing, on the rate of breeding, on the slowly changing physical conditions of the country, and more especially on the nature of the other inhabitants with which the varying species comes into competition. (308)

Such modifications are incredibly slow, and, importantly, never "complete." Here again the metaphor of rock formation is illuminating. "Each formation, on this view," Darwin writes, "does not mark a new and complete act of creation, but only an occasional scene, taken almost at hazard, in a slowly changing drama" (309). Such a "slowly changing drama" is the topic of Hardy's final novel, *The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament*, cyclical work that draws parallels between the accretive temporality of limestone (itself comprised of skeletal fragments) and the repetitive process of biological inheritance that

produce organisms always slightly different from—and yet tied to—their progenitors.

CHAPTER FOUR: **Hardy's Lively Materials: Architectural Surface and Racialized Form** **in *The Well-Beloved***

Since at least 1910, critics have speculated that “one reason why Mr. Hardy quit novel writing was the hostile reception that greeted *Jude the Obscure*” (Phelps 408). Most recently, J. B. Bullen has remarked that “after the appearance of *Jude the Obscure* in 1895 and its intensely hostile reception, [Hardy] abandoned the writing of fiction” (Thomas 213). Often cited as evidence that Hardy turned to poetry in response to the critical reception of *Jude* are the following lines from his October 17, 1896 diary entry:

Poetry. Perhaps I can express more fully in verse ideas and emotions
which run counter to the inert crystallized opinion—hard as a rock—
which the vast body of men have vested interests in supporting. (*Life* 302)

Cited in isolation, these lines confirm the view that Hardy found poetry a more hospitable venue for the expression of controversial ideas. Attention to larger context of their composition, however, reveals another, much more complex set of issues at work in Hardy's decision to given up novel writing at the turn of the century.

Directly before his comment on poetry lies a short note on the descriptive tactics of the poet George Crabbe (1754-1832): “A novel, good, microscopic touch in Crabbe,” Hardy writes, “He gives surface without outline, describing his church by telling *the colour of the lichens*” (*Life* 302, emphasis in original). Hardy's remarks on Crabbe might at first seem to have little to do with the ensuing speculations about poetry. On closer examination, however, it becomes clear that they inspire his reflection on the potential of poetry to “run counter to inert crystallized opinion.” Just as Crabbe refrains from describing the form of stone, elaborating instead the color of the lichens, so too poetry, Hardy speculates, might soften hard lines and enliven the inert.

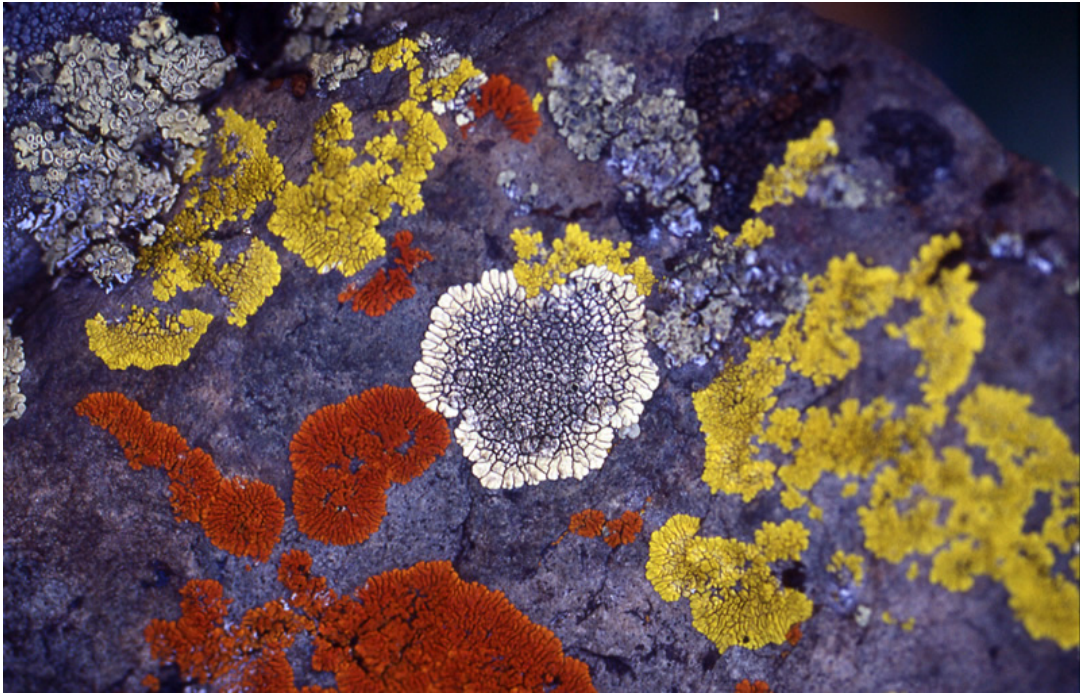


Figure 3: Lichen (St. Clair)

Crabbe was a Romantic-era poet known for detailed and realistic poems about the English countryside, poems often written in opposition to the idyllic portraits of his contemporaries.¹⁰⁹ Unlike his artistic rival, William Wordsworth, who argued that poetry’s “object is truth, not individual and local, but general and operative” (Preface 105), Crabbe—a former surgeon who grew up in the impoverished seacoast village of Aldeburgh, Suffolk—stressed the importance of the everyday and the particular to poetic work. Hardy identifies a similar fidelity to the mundane at work in Crabbe’s description of a church: attending to the lively materiality of the lichens that paper its walls, Crabbe is said to give “surface without outline.” Where Wordsworth, for instance, might have described the “lovely forms” of the church structure (“Tintern Abbey” 141), Crabbe highlights the texture and color of the building’s surface. In this way, Hardy’s diary entry on Crabbe acts as a kind of connective tissue for this chapter, which shifts the terms of

¹⁰⁹ Crabbe’s best-known poem, *The Village* (1783), for instance, was written in protest to Oliver Goldsmith’s *The Deserted Village* (1770), which Crabbe found overly idyllic and sentimental.

the discussion of Hardy's abandonment of the novel form for poetry from questions of critical response to questions about the materiality and temporality of literary form. For, importantly, Hardy did not turn entirely to poetry after composing his October 17, 1896 diary entry. Instead, he returned to a novel that—not unlike his remarks on Crabbe—privileges the irregular temporality of matter over the smooth ideality of form.

The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament (1897) occupies an uncertain place in Hardy's corpus. As Patricia Ingham has aptly remarked, the work both "is and is not Hardy's last novel," ("Introduction" xviii). First published in serial form in 1892 under the title *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved*, the novel was extensively revised and republished in 1897 in volume form under a new title, *The Well-Beloved: A Sketch of Temperament*.¹¹⁰ Thus, although Hardy's final novel is typically understood to be *Jude the Obscure* (1895), Hardy's 1897 revision of *The Well-Beloved* was his final engagement with the genre.

Chronicling the romantic and artistic exploits of a sculptor named Jocelyn Pierston (Pearston in the 1892 text), *The Well-Beloved* explores the fascination with ideals attractive due to their lack of material specificity. Obsessed with the ideal form of a woman he calls "the Well-Beloved," Jocelyn chases the ethereal figure as it migrates from human body to human body, forsaking the material specificity of individual women in favor of a pure and contentless form. After its brief manifestations as Laura, "the flaxen-haired edition," and Marcia, a woman with "Juno's classical face and dark eyes"—as well as various other women of diverse physical appearances—the Well-

¹¹⁰ *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* was serialized simultaneously in the *Illustrated London News* and *Harper's Bazaar* from October to December 1892 and published in single-volume form in March 1897. It therefore bookends *Jude*, which was serialized from December 1894 to November 1895 and appeared in November 1895. Ingham has contended that the 1897 edition of *The Well-Beloved* "was by no means a 'reprinting' but a radical rewriting, related both to *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* and *Jude the Obscure*." Hardy's revision of *The Well-Beloved*, she argues, "produced a new novel," which merits consideration as Hardy's last (Ingham xxxvii).

Beloved eventually takes abode in the body of Jocelyn's young cousin, an island woman named Avice Caro (201, 298).¹¹¹ Upon Avice's unexpected death, the *Well-Beloved* is then passed on to Avice's daughter (also named Avice Caro), and then subsequently also her granddaughter, Avice Caro the third. While the 1893 version concludes with the sixty-year-old Jocelyn's marriage of Avice III—"a still more modernized, up-to-date edition of the two Avices of that blood with whom he had been involved more or less for the last forty years," in the revised 1897 version Avice III jilts Jocelyn, eloping with an outsider from the island of Jersey while Jocelyn weds his earlier love, Marcia (289).

Through its cyclical plot, which seems almost to regress into a mathematical, iterative sequence with its protagonist's objects of desire reduced to mere numbers, *The Well-Beloved* parodies this form-obsessed sculptor's "bondage to beauty in the ideal" (325). Within *The Well-Beloved*, however, as this chapter reveals, narrative reoccurrences produce not sameness, but always difference. As the novel demonstrates through Jocelyn's erotic repetition compulsion, reiteration does not mark the return to an earlier moment, but rather, underscores its temporal and thus also material difference from past events. In what follows, I suggest that *The Well-Beloved* works to explore the accretive properties of narrative and history, revealing the irregularity and indeterminacy of any representation or identity by drawing attention to its temporal component. In his work on Crabbe's materialist poetics, Jerome McGann has suggested that Crabbe's close descriptions of rural and working class life "serve at once to fix our attention on specific matters, on a series of particular facts and ideas and events, and at the same time to accumulate their data in an additive scheme" (562). I distill something similar at work in Hardy's final novel: a meditation on the fundamentally "additive" nature of literary description. *The Well-Beloved*, I argue, thus paves the way for the emergence of a

¹¹¹ All citations of *The Well-Beloved* refer to the 1897 edition.

modernist *poetics of surface* in which description is not conceived as transparent representation, but rather as an elaboration of surface.¹¹² In so doing, I conceive of Hardy's turn to poetry, not as a concern for self-expression, but as a fascination with the uneven temporality of history and the ability of language to simultaneously inscribe and decorate the past.

Where others dismiss *The Well-Beloved* as "one of the oddest items in the Hardy canon," I contend that this seemingly uncharacteristic work reveals a central theme across Hardy's corpus: an interest in exploring the temporality of material bodies (Morton 200). Exploiting an analogy made by the influential Victorian art critic John Ruskin between architectural surface and skin, I suggest that *The Well-Beloved* offers a unique intervention into nineteenth-century theories of race as a structural essence. While much scholarship has explored the representation of gender, sexuality, and class in Hardy's writing, scant attention has been paid to his conception of race.¹¹³ An effort towards correcting this oversight, this chapter contends that Hardy's major intervention in the history of race is his investigation of the unmarked quality of whiteness. That Hardy's novels feature relatively few characters of color should not prevent us from analyzing the racial epistemologies at work within his novels. Attending to the ways Jocelyn's desire for the Well-Beloved is racialized throughout the novel allows us to see how Hardy satirizes the racist underpinnings of the obsession with form across host of Victorian aesthetic movements and cultural phenomena: neoclassical aesthetics, the attempt to mathematicize beauty, and, most significantly, a newly emergent racial paradigm concerned with the correlation of skin tones with deeper characterological and moral

¹¹² The phrase "poetics of surface" has previously been used to describe the aesthetic innovations of Romantics (Robinson), expressionists (Boes), and postmodernists (Darley) alike. I borrow it here to describe a phenomenon specific to Hardy's accretive literary-architectural practice.

¹¹³ To my knowledge, the only truly sustained discussion of Hardy and race occurs in Bownas, *Thomas Hardy and Empire* (esp. chapter 5).

traits. Recent scholars have positioned attention to “the surface” as an alternative to ideology critique, which seeks to plumb the depths of texts in order to reveal their latent meaning.¹¹⁴ In what follows, I show how Hardy’s descriptive surfaces themselves perform a kind of critique in drawing attention to the racial implications of the aesthetic impulse to evacuate figures of their particularities, to reduce them to their most pure and ideal form.

SURFACE, OUTLINE

The fulcrum between two very distinct periods in Hardy’s career, *The Well-Beloved* both looks forward to Hardy’s turn to poetry and backward to Hardy’s thirty years of experience with the novel genre.¹¹⁵ Hardy once explained his turn away from the novel with the suggestion that the genre was “gradually losing artistic form, with a beginning, middle, and end” (*Life* 309). Rather than resisting such narrative disintegration, however, *The Well-Beloved* embraces it. It is both a novel and anti-novel, its repetitious plot devolving into a kind of non-linear regression with no clear beginning, middle, or end. In its disarticulation of the linearity of the novel form, I will suggest, *The Well-Beloved* paves the way for the experiments in narration and description that emerged with modernism. It does so, curiously perhaps, by appropriating Gothic tropes of ornament, decoration, and what Ruskin called “inessential form” to develop a poetics of surface that pushes the linearity and structure of novelistic *Bildung* to its aesthetic and political limits.

¹¹⁴ See Best and Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction.”

¹¹⁵ It is just before and during his revision of *The Well-Beloved* in 1897 that Hardy begins to wonder whether poetry might be a better form for his art, given its power, as he once wrote, “to intensify the expression of things ... so that the heart and inner meaning is made vividly visible” (*Life* 183). Hardy’s 1912 preface to his collected works suggests that he understood *The Well-Beloved* to be undertaking a similar task. Here he states that his final novel is different “from all or most others of the series in that the interest aimed at is of an ideal or subjective nature” (*The Well-Beloved* 173-4).

In its reiteration of tropes and lines from previous Hardy novels, *The Well-Beloved* distills Hardy's own novelistic corpus into its most basic structure.¹¹⁶ Like *The Return of the Native* (1878), the novel's highly enclosed environment—a tiny island that boasts only a “half-a-dozen Christian and surnames”—functions as a kind of control setting for formal experiments with plot and character.¹¹⁷ Like *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* (1891), it explores questions of heredity and family resemblance.¹¹⁸ Its setting even more isolated and enclosed than that of his other novels, its plot yet more schematic, *The Well-Beloved* compounds and reduces Hardy's previous novels into a structuralist dream-scape where form reigns and content is irrelevant. Marcel Proust once remarked upon the structuralism of *The Well-Beloved*, drawing an implicit parallel between Hardy's fascination with form and figure and his experience as an architect. In book five of *À la recherche du temps perdu* his protagonist Marcel cites Hardy's characteristic “stonemason's geometry” as evidence that while the theme of an author's works may change, certain figures repeat throughout their oeuvre (*Captive* 506). “Do you remember the stonemasons in *Jude the Obscure*,” Marcel asks Albertine,

and in *The Well-Beloved* the blocks of stone which the father hews out of the island coming in boats to be piled up in son's work-shop where they are turned into statues; in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, the parallelism of the

¹¹⁶ As J. Hillis Miller has remarked, “*The Well-Beloved* functions as an interpretation of the earlier novels or even as their parody. By presenting a schematic and ‘unrealistic’ version of the pattern they share, it brings out their latent meaning” (151).

¹¹⁷ Just as Clym Yeobright's return to Egdon Heath disrupts the delicate ecosystem of the heath (engagements are broken off, new pairs form), Jocelyn Pierston's reappearance on the Isle of Slingers in *The Well-Beloved* sets a series of actions in motion that alter the kinship structure of the island.

¹¹⁸ Remarking upon similarities between *The Well-Beloved*, *Tess*, and *Jude*, Ousby has suggested that “it is in the fiction of the 1890s that [Hardy's] interest [in heredity] is given its most complete expression. With *Tess* resembling the portraits of her d'Urberville ancestors and being resembled in turn by Liza-Lu, with the same face passing unchanged through three generations offices, and with *Jude* and *Sue* linked by physical characteristics derived from common ancestry, the characters in these novels seem to inhabit a bewildering hall of mirrors” (“The Convergence of the Twain” 787).

tombs, and also the parallel line of the boat and the nearby railway coaches containing the lovers and the corpse; the parallel between *The Well-Beloved*, where the man loves three women, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* where the woman loves three men, and in short all those novels which can be superimposed on one another like the houses piled vertically on the rocky soil of the island? (507)

The protagonist of *The Well-Beloved* treats women in a way not unlike the way Marcel approaches Hardy's novels—as variations on the same theme. Evacuated of their particularities by Jocelyn's idealizing gaze, the women Jocelyn desires are reduced to mere integers in a mathematical sequence. "I see—I see now," exclaims Avice II in the 1893 edition of the novel, "I am—only one—in a long, long row!" Avice's utterance is itself a repetition of a line from *Tess of the D'urbervilles* in which Tess, refusing Angel Clare's history lessons, expresses her frustration with the repetitious nature of history: "Because what's the use of learning that I am one of a long row only—finding out that there is set down in some old book somebody just like me, and to know that I shall only act her part" (126). Like Tess, the women of *The Well-Beloved* are destined to act the part of all women before them. As characters literally "set down in some old book," the Avices are forced to play the feminized object of desire within the novel, spurring on the plot like a motor whose revolutions produce protagonistic forward motion.

In this, the novel could be said to perform what Luce Irigaray has called "the (indefinite) series one plus one plus one" of the male economy of desire (63). For Irigaray, this desire economy erases sexual difference, imposing a masculine subject that defers desire to a beyond, rather than simply letting it exist in an "unpunctuated space-time" (64). The measured, forward-moving temporality of masculine desire is highlighted in the novel's three parts, "A Young Man of Twenty," "A Young Man of Forty," and "A

Young Man of Sixty.” While Jocelyn sets the metronomic pace of the narrative, the Avices punctuate the plot with their birth and coming of age. Highlighting the ways that Jocelyn’s idealization of the female form is satirized throughout the novel, feminist scholars have read *The Well-Beloved* as an attack on “the always resurgent dictatorship of the ahistorical metaphysics of Beauty” (Bezrucka 230). Ingham, for instance, points out how the epigraph to the 1897 edition of the novel, “One shape of many names”—taken from Shelley’s “The Revolt of Islam”—epitomizes a misogynist trope one finds in other Hardy novels in which particularities of individual women are evacuated in service to an ideal. Hardy’s epigraph, she notes, “describes not only Jocelyn’s behavior, but that of the narrators in Hardy’s early novels who try to impose a single ideal of womanliness on all heroines” (“Introduction” xxi).¹¹⁹

Jocelyn’s disregard for the specific thoughts and desires of the women he pursues is figured in the sculptor’s aesthetic formalism. In conversations Jocelyn is deaf to the content of women’s speech: “The subject of her discourse he cared nothing about ... He took special pains that in catching her voice he might not comprehend her words. To the tones he had a right, none to the articulations” (248). Like a music theorist fascinated with the patterns and structures of songs, but indifferent to the lyrics, Jocelyn treats the actual substance of the women he loves as irrelevant and interchangeable. Throughout *The Well-Beloved* Hardy is clear that Jocelyn’s desire is entirely spiritual in nature: “It was not the flesh” Jocelyn is said to be after; “he had never knelt low to that” (325). In its critique of Jocelyn’s idealism, *The Well-Beloved* might be read as a response to the recent rise of scientific attempts to uncover the ideal human form in aesthetics. Benjamin Morgan has shown how in the mid-nineteenth century an attempt to “explain aesthetic

¹¹⁹ In *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), for instance, Elfride Swancourt’s suitor, the reviewer Henry Knight, claims explains his knack for writing about women because “All I know about women, or men either, is a mass of generalities” (124).

experience with principles that were determined, fixed, and universal” led to the mathematicization of aesthetic form (Morgan 1). In mid-century works like *Proportion: Or, The Geometric Principle of Beauty, Analysed* (1843) and *First Principles of Symmetrical Beauty* (1846), the aesthetic scientist David Ramsay Hay, for instance, aspired to deduce the reveal the fundamental proportions of beauty through measurement and analogy. One experiment conducted by Hay and various members of Edinburgh’s Aesthetic Club entailed measuring the proportions of the Venus de Medici and comparing them to those of actual women. Both the de Medici and the living women were placed separately in a box containing a set of rods that slid back and forth to mark points in three-dimensional space (Morgan 7). These proportions were then compared to the proportions of color harmony and music harmony in the hopes of uncovering beauty’s secret formula.

The attempt to deduce the numerical ratios of beauty was grounded in a version of aesthetic formalism that understood form through the principle of unity. Explaining this “*the law of Unity*,” Hay wrote,

Let, then, there be a mass before us of unformed matter; let it be the clay of the sculptor, or the stone of the architect, (or ‘the clay in the hand of the potter;’) its parts must all assume some intelligible relation to some unit or whole, as a necessary condition of beauty, or the manifestation of mind. That the figure be a triangle, a globe, a pyramid, that its parts assume such relations as to belong to one intelligible whole. (16)

That Hay approached every form as a fundamental unity meant that, for him, aesthetic objects (whether sculptures or women’s bodies) were best studied in isolation from their environment. It was not matter, but form that was primary, and thus any connection between the aesthetic object to its context were left out of his analyses.

Likewise, Hardy's protagonist ignores the materiality and positionality of the women he sculpts. Throughout the novel, the substance of women is described twice as "tractable," as word that conveys Jocelyn's assumption that young women are easily plucked from their communal and familial context to be molded into a suitable partner. Confident that Avice II will accept his marriage proposal (she doesn't), Jocelyn muses, "how could a country girl refuse such an opportunity?—he could pack her off to school for two or three years, marry her, enlarge her mind by a little travel, and take his chance on the rest" (255). In reality, however, the "formation" of the Avices is highly gendered, racialized, and classed. Upon encountering Avice I for the very first time as an adult, Jocelyn notices that she has been transformed into a kind of neutral material in order to make her appealing to suitors such as himself:

He observed that every aim of those who had brought her up had been to get her away mentally as far as possible from her natural and individual life as an inhabitant of a peculiar island: to make her an exact copy of tens of thousands of other people, in whose circumstances there was nothing special, distinctive, or picturesque; to teach her to forget all the experiences of her ancestors; to drown the local ballads by songs purchased at the Budmouth fashionable music-sellers', and the local vocabulary by a governess-tongue of no country at all. She lived in a house that would have been the fortune of an artist, and learnt to draw London suburban villas from printed copies. (186)

Avice I is taught to forget her island ancestry, to rid herself of her accent, and to value the aesthetic of the metropolis over that of the island where she was raised. A concern with the homogenization of culture drives these lines in which "printed copies" of the London suburbs carry more currency than actual and unique homes found in the countryside. And

Avice's character too has been globalized: "her natural and individual life as an inhabitant of a peculiar island" has been erased in an attempt to render her legible to Kimberlins (the name islanders use to refer to those from the mainland).

In drawing attention to the gendered, raced, and classed ways that a belief in ideal form erases material particularity and contextual relation, Hardy's novel calls attention to essentialist underpinnings of formalist aesthetics. A pure and disembodied form, the Well-Beloved holds an inverse relationship to materiality. When asked the color of Mrs. Nichola Pine-Avon's eyes when the Well-Beloved is inhabiting her, Jocelyn responds "Her eyes? I don't go much in for colour, being professionally sworn to form" (262). When the Well-Beloved then evacuates the body of Mrs. Pine-Avon, however, she is said to "grow material, a superficies of flesh and bone merely, a person of lines and surfaces" (229). Just as his lack of desire for Mrs. Pine-Avon coincides with her becoming-material, moreover, the death of his childhood love, Avice Caro, instigates a spontaneously increase in his desire: "The flesh was absent altogether; it was love rarefied and refined to its highest attar. He had felt nothing like it before" (231). The correlation between "the absence of the corporeal matter" and the presence of the Well-Beloved defines the Well-Beloved by negation (202). As the shape that gives form to Jocelyn's desire, it is the remnant or trace of lack as such.

Hardy's depiction of the Well-Beloved as "the ghostly outlines of former shapes taken by his Love," recalls the neoclassical genre of the "outline," which flourished throughout the nineteenth century in highly commercialized drawings of ancient engravings (324). The genre of the outline originated in the work of John Flaxman (1755-1826), a sculptor and draftsman who, as Robert Rosenblum explains, "willfully eliminated the irregularities of luminary and textural effects, paring his vocabulary down to the rudimentary language of pure outline on monochrome paper" (159). Flaxman's

figural tracings, Jonah Siegel has written, “emphasized outline over surface”—a quality that places them in direct opposition to the aesthetic of the poet George Crabbe, whom Hardy, the reader will recall, praised in his 1896 diary entry for giving “surface without outline” (192). Where Crabbe describes the color of the lichens that paper the church walls, like Flaxman, Jocelyn produces “white and cadaverous countenances” that forsake color for form (309).

Tracking “the long-lasting lure of the outline” across nineteenth-century artistic culture, Jonah Siegel has read the outline as a semiotic container for the desire of the absent art object of antiquity. The stripped-down figures of the outline, Siegel writes, “gave a fruitful yet controlled shape to longing” (227). We can see this longing at work in the writings of the father of neoclassicism himself, the art historian and archaeologist Johann Winckelmann (1717-1768), whose *History of Ancient Art* (1764) figures the absent work of classical art as a departing “beloved.” As Winckelmann writes, reflecting on his own desire for the ancient works of art which persist only in copies,

I could not refrain from searching into the fate of works of art as far as my eye could reach; just as a maiden, standing on the shore of the ocean, follows with tearful eyes her departing lover with no hope of ever seeing him again, and fancies that in the distant sail she sees the image of her beloved. Like that loving maiden we too have, as it were, nothing but the shadowy outline of the object left of the object of our wishes, but that every indistinctness awakens only a more earnest longing for what we have lost, and we study the copies of the originals more attentively than we should have done the originals themselves if we had been in full possession of them. (364–5)

Like Jocelyn's ever "inaccessible ghost," Winckelmann's "departing lover" is desirable precisely because of his inaccessibility and indeterminacy (229). Similarly, in *The Well-Beloved* Jocelyn's desire is said to erupt with particular force when the physical particularities of women are erased or occluded. Watching a string of women emerge from their carriages at a distance, Jocelyn has a sudden feeling he will see the Well-Beloved:

He had not seen their faces, nothing of them but vague forms, and yet he was suddenly seized with a presentiment. Its gist was that he might be going to re-encounter the Well-Beloved that night ... how instantly he would recognize it under whatever complexion, contour, accent, height, or carriage that it might choose to masquerade! (218)

Insistent that form always materializes itself, *The Well-Beloved* reveals how attempts to produce neutral or qualityless forms result always in the production of gendered and racialized forms, forms inseparable, in other words, from the content or meaning they aspire to escape. Critical of representational schemas that work to strip figures down to a basic and ideal form, Hardy's writing embraces a Gothic mode of representation, one that attends closely to material stratification and the surface as a contact point between bodies and their environments. This additive aesthetic is deeply indebted to the work of John Ruskin, a notorious critic of the stripped-down forms of neoclassicism and a proponent of the spontaneous materiality of Gothic ornamentation.¹²⁰

In much of his work, though most notably in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851-3), Ruskin traces the appeal of Gothic architecture to its elaborate ornamentation, which manifests the undulating temporality of history

¹²⁰ As a young architect, Hardy could not have failed to encounter Ruskin's writings, which exercised major influence over the Gothic Revival that swept nineteenth-century England. As early as 1962 he recorded reading *Modern Painters* (1843).

through inscriptions on its surface. The surface detail and decorative flourish through which medieval craftsmen expressed their individuality, Ruskin avers, “all admit irregularity as they imply change; and to banish imperfection is to destroy expression, to check exertion, to paralyze vitality” (10: 203–4). For Ruskin, the surface was space of lively variability where the vibrant beauty of nature and matter’s irregularities were most clearly articulated. Color was one important means by which this diversity was expressed. “Variegation,” Ruskin writes in a diary entry from December 20, 1848, “is the arbitrary presence or absence of colouring matter, and the beauty is more in the colour than the outline. Hence stains, blotchings, cloudings, etc., in marble, on skins, and so on, and their beauty of irregularity” (8: 178n2). Ruskin’s theorization of the surface as a space of temporal variation where the micro-movements of history are recorded finds an unlikely analogue in more recent feminist, queer, and trans* thinking about skin. In his recent essay “Skin Memories,” Jay Prosser describes the skin as the body’s memory of its own irregular history in terms similar to those of Ruskin’s description of architectural surface. “Skin re-members,” Prosser writes,

both literally in its material surface and metaphorically in resignifying on this surface, not only race, sex and age, but the quite detailed specificities of life histories. In its color, texture, accumulated marks and blemishes, it remembers something of our class, labour/leisure activities, even (in the use of cosmetic surgery and/or skincare products) our most intimate psychic relation to our bodies. Skin is the body’s memory of our lives.

(52)

Ruskin himself frequently drew parallels between architectural surface and skin, both of which he understood as examples what he called “inessential form.” In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) he explicates the concept of “inessential form” with reference to

“modern animal painting, distinguished as it has been by peculiar attention to the colours, lustre, and texture of skin” (8: 240). While some painters limit their representations of animals to “excrecential characters” such as the hides of colts or the manes of lions, giving only their subject’s “necessary and principal attributes,” others (for example, Tintoret and Rubens) relish in the inessential forms of skin, horns, and hair: “the picturesque direction of their thoughts is always distinctly recognisable,” Ruskin explains,

as clinging to the surface, to the less essential character, and as developing out of this a sublimity different from that of the creature itself; a sublimity which is, in a sort, common to all the objects of creation, and the same in its constituent elements, whether it be sought in the clefts and folds of shaggy hair, or in the chasms and rents of rocks, or in the hanging of thickets or hill sides, or in the alternations of gaiety and gloom in the variegation of the shell, the plume, or the cloud. (8: 240)

Ironically, it is this “inessential” quality that “all the objects of creation” have in common. Humans, animals, rocks, and clouds—all are characterized by enfoldings and flourishes that exceed what can be considered *essential* to their existence.

Ruskin’s theorization of the semiotic excess of surface, I want to suggest, can help us to think through the tensions inherent to the centrality of skin to the modern racial paradigm. As Anne Alin Cheng has argued, “we cannot address the history of modern surfaces without also asking after the *other* history of skin, the violent, dysphoric one—the one about racialized nakedness inherited from the Enlightenment so necessary to Western constructions of humanity and the one that speaks of objectification, commodification, and fetishization of racialized skin” (11). As a surface phenomenon that nevertheless intricately choreographs social relations, skin is both superficial and

exacting. Here, “the container determines—or even engenders—the content,” writes Cheng, whose book on the early-twentieth century black exotic dancer, Josephine Baker, *Second Skin* (2013), draws parallels between the modernist architectural fascination with the production of “pure surface” and twentieth-century psychoanalytic theories of skin (30). Inspired by Cheng, I want to read Ruskin’s critique of the aesthetic disavowal of surface for its implications for a theory of race, especially because Ruskin’s semiotics of surface resists the very correlation of outer with inner traits that racism itself turns upon.

Proposing that the signifying system of the surface operates autonomously from the depths it papers over, in *The Seven Lamps* Ruskin returns to the analogy of skin in order to formulate the aesthetic principle that color “never follows form, but is arranged on an entirely separate system” (8: 177):

What mysterious connection there may be between the shape of the spots on an animal’s skin and its anatomical system, I do not know, nor even if such a connection has in anywise been traced: but to the eye the systems are entirely separate, and in many cases that of colour is accidentally variable. The stripes of a zebra do not follow the lines of its body or limbs, still less the spots of a leopard. ... Whatever harmonies there may be, are distinctly like those of two separate musical parts, coinciding here and there only—never discordant, but essentially different. I hold this, then, for the first great principle of architectural colour. Let it be visibly independent of form. Never paint a column with vertical lines, but always cross it. (8: 177)

The autonomy of surface from form—while for Ruskin here merely an aesthetic principle—has implications for our thinking of race. Ruskin’s reluctance to correlate surfaces with the depth of structure, to let the surface proliferate of its own accord, can be

fruitfully contrasted with the sense of semiotic fixity produced by the twentieth-century philosopher of race Frantz Fanon called “epidermalization.” In his groundbreaking book *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) Fanon argues that racism is better described as the “epidermalization” of inferiority than its “internalization” (11). Narrating a scene of racist encounter in which he is interpellated with phrases like “‘Dirty Nigger’ Or simply ‘Look, a Negro!’” Fanon explains how in being reduced to his skin, he is fixed “in the sense in which a chemical solution is fixed by a dye” (11). Ruskin’s fascination with the surface as the site where differences proliferate could be interpreted to fetishize colored surfaces in a way that would reproduce epidermalization. But I propose that Ruskin’s theorization of the surface as a space of lively variability opens up a space for affirming the inessential differences that proliferate on the surface without reducing those differences to some deeper cause, such as an essential inferiority.

If racism, in Fanon’s terms, fixes the black subject in his skin, reducing him to the signified of the observer’s master semiotic, Ruskin’s aesthetics of surface destabilizes the skin as a signifier of greater meaning. That the surface, for Ruskin, was decorative, did not mean that it was insignificant or ineffectual. To the contrary, *surface was everything*. This was because Ruskin believed that art produced not “truth of essence,” but rather “truth of aspect” (10: 48). He theorizes art as an essential *seeming* or *appearing*: the aim of art, he wrote, was “to portray the appearances of things, and to deepen the natural impressions which they produce upon living creatures” (10: 48). That art was fundamentally *affective* meant that art could not be conceived outside of the sensations it generated. The surface was the contact zone in which this experience occurred. Rather than presuming meaning to inhere in a structure or body’s essential character, that is, Ruskin understood that meaning was temporally produced through a history of encounters with the surface.

As such, Ruskin railed against the idealization of form in neoclassicism—an aesthetic, as Daniel Purdy has importantly shown, with its own racialized history. As Purdy argues, the fetishization of the purity of form in neoclassicism ultimately “became an argument in favor of whiteness, not only in terms of marble but also skin color” (86). “Within neo-classical aesthetics,” he writes,

the whiteness of marble sculpture reinforced the importance of form... If sculptures had varying colors, it was argued, then the eye would be drawn to the surface of the sculpture. White signified the absence of color; it was the color that banished all thought about color, allowing the observer to contemplate the beauty that lay within the form of the human body. Nevertheless, color was never eliminated from thinking about beauty, in large part because ‘whiteness’ was understood both as the absence of color and as the defining color of Europeans. (86).

In his readings of Winckelmann, Goethe, and Hegel, Purdy convincingly demonstrates the centrality of a racialized conception of whiteness to neoclassical aesthetics, drawing attention to the way that the absence of color was correlated not only with the heightened aesthetic consciousness of the Greeks, but with their cultural superiority. “The absence of coloring,” Purdy notes, “was one of the features that separated the naked Greek warrior from the painted American savage, and thereby became a means for modern Europeans to redeploy the distinction between civilization and barbarians” (87). Within this context, Ruskin’s trenchant critique of art forms that prioritize outline over surface (he despised the neoclassical genre of the outline, for instance¹²¹), here gathers deeper political significance: in its rejection of the lineage of classicism, it opens up the door for alternative

¹²¹ As Ruskin argued, “All outline engravings from pictures are bad work, and only serve to corrupt the public taste” (15: 84). He claims to have refused to allow his students to draw outlines in class, telling them “Nature relieves one mass, or one tint, against another; but outlines none” (15: 14).

histories of art, histories other than that of clean lines and white ideals. Ruskin himself may have been unaware of the implications of his architectural thought for the history of race. But Hardy's final novel, I argue in the following section, exploits this potential within Ruskin, excavating from within his thought a theory of the role of temporality and history in the materialization of bodies.

REPETITION, LIVELINESS

"Modelling and chipping his ephemeral fancies into perennial shapes," Jocelyn resembles a neoclassical artist with whom Hardy corresponded during the 1880s, the sculptor Thomas Woolner (217). A founding member of the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, Woolner was well known during Hardy's time for his sculptures of women portraying ideals and archetypes such as "Love" or "The Housemaid."¹²² By the 1890s, however, as Hardy was composing *The Well-Beloved* the latent neoclassicism of sculptors like Woolner had given way to a new sculptural paradigm. What Hardy's close friend Edmund Gosse in 1894 termed the "New Sculpture" signaled a turn away from the neoclassicism heralded by Flaxman's outlines toward more lively and realistic figurations. In a series of articles for *The Art Journal*, Gosse detailed how sculptors like Frederick Leighton and Hamo Thornycroft were beginning to exploit the materiality of the medium: in the works of Leighton, Gosse writes, one finds "something far more vital and nervous than the soft following Flaxman dreamed of; a series of surfaces, varied and appropriate, all closely studied from nature" (140).¹²³ What Gosse here identifies as the

¹²² Jane Thomas has thus read *The Well-Beloved* as a satiric reversal of the Pygmalion myth important to the Pre-Raphaelite's elision of aesthetic vision and erotic impulse (131). As she notes, on December 7, 1881 Woolner sent Hardy a copy of his poem *Pygmalion*, which Hardy politely declared "charming" (*Letters* I: 97).

¹²³ While Hardy's relationship with Woolner did not last, he became close friends with Thornycroft. After Thornycroft died in 1925 Hardy remembered "the hours [he] had spent in Thornycroft's London studio and at his home" (*Life* 464).

principle tenets of the New Sculpture, that is—vitality, variation, and the elaboration of surface—are principles of major concern in Hardy’s notebooks during the 1890s.

Following the publication of *The Pursuit of the Well-Beloved* in 1893, Hardy wrote in a letter: “I consider a social system based on individual spontaneity to promise better for happiness than a curbed and uniform one under which all temperaments are bound to shape themselves to a single pattern of living” (*Life* 274). Other entries abandon the notion of individuality entirely, asking whether continuity can be said to exist for subjects produced moment to moment in and through their surroundings. In December 1890 he observes, “I am more than ever convinced that persons are successively various persons, according as each special strand in their characters brought uppermost by circumstances” (*Life* 241). Hardy’s fin-de-siècle diary entries imply an interest in developing dynamic understanding of human character, one that expresses itself over time through material interaction. “Forces; emotions; tendencies,” he wrote in June 1892, the summer before *The Pursuit* appeared in serial form, “The Characters do not act under the influence of reason” (*Literary* 261).

Gilles Deleuze has suggested that Hardy’s characters are not so much “people or subjects” as “collections of intensive sensations” (39–40). As Deleuze proposes, one finds in Hardy “individuation without a subject (40). Remarking upon a similar resistance to the representation of interiority in Hardy, Phillip Mallett has described

the tendency of the novels to register subjectivity ... somatically, in terms of immediate physical sensation, or changed perception of the outer world: hence the recurrence in his work of such words as palpitating, trembling, listless, flushing, librating, irradiated, dazzled, tremulous, and the frequent references to the movement of the blood, and the quickening of the pulse, or of the breath. (25)

The Well-Beloved might at first seem to be the exception to such characterizations: its cold and exacting protagonist extracts the vitality from those he sculpts, transforming them into static and eternal figures. But underneath the rigid formalism and mechanical narrative repetitions of *The Well-Beloved* lurks a robust theory concerning the spontaneity with which bodies, artworks, personalities—indeed all physical things—emerge and change, a liveliness and unpredictability that renders them irreducible to their original or fundamental form.

Hardy's exploration of the dynamic circumstances in which character emerges can be seen to prefigure the concern of modernist writers like Gertrude Stein with the performative interdependence of a subject and environments that change from generation to generation. As Wendy Steiner has explained, for Stein the "aspect of the personality that seemed spontaneous and 'creative' expressed itself through repetitions" (199). The reciprocal relationship between character and what she calls "the composition in which we live" produces subjects always slightly different moment to moment ("Portraits" 165). "That is what a generation does," she writes, "it shows that moving is existing" (165). Hardy explores the concept of generation through Jocelyn's infatuation with three biological generations of Caro women. After the death of Avice I, Jocelyn can see nothing but the shadow of the original Avice in her daughter, Avice II: "He could not read her individual character, owing to the confusing effect of her likeness to a woman who he valued too late." (244). In the *Well-Beloved* we find a manifestation of the sameness that Jocelyn expects to persist from generation to generation: "it was not the washerwoman that he saw now. In front of her, on the surface of her, was shining out that more real, more penetrating being whom he knew so well!" (243). But Jocelyn's hopes that each generation of Caro women will perfectly reproduce the characteristics of the former are consistently dashed, as differences in circumstance and upbringing produce

frustratingly individualized results. The Well-Beloved, he is disappointed to discover, always materializes with a difference.

In her 1934 lecture “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein argues that ultimately “there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis” (167). Defending herself against those who find in her characterizations of persons nothing but stale repetitions, she explains that her technique sets out to capture the very vitality that emerges from the impossibility of true repetition. For Stein, the necessary difference introduced in any repetition is the very precondition for life: “What makes life,” she explains, is “that the insistence is different”:

no matter how often you tell the same story if there is anything alive in the telling the emphasis is different... It is like a frog hopping he cannot ever hop exactly the same distance or the same way of hopping at every hop.
(167)

Attempting a feat of reverse engineering, Stein’s literary portraits spontaneously generate life through linguistic insistence. Like the cinema, Stein explains, which produces movement through the repetition of frames only slightly different from one another, her characters express a certain “vitality of movement” through her use of insistence (173). As Stein avers, “I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous statement of what that person was until I had no many things but one thing” (176).

What Stein achieves through poetic language, Hardy’s effects through narrative structure: each time a particular woman fails to fully embody the ideal of the Well-Beloved, the narrative is restarted; the Well-Beloved finds its home in another body, and Jocelyn’s desire is reignited. Like a flipbook, repetition with a difference motors the plot

through the deferment of desire and thus the instigation of narrative prolongment. Of the *Well-Beloved* it is said, “Only one thing remained unalterable in her: her instability of tenure” (212). Describing what she calls “the subject’s attachment to formalism itself” Lauren Berlant observes that “All genres produce drama around their moments of potential failure;” the fact that “the romance might not pan out, or its failure might not affirm the beauty of the elusive ideal,” she writes, perpetuates rather than undermines highly formalized plots (233). In this way, the *Well-Beloved* is a trope for the inconstant and never-fully-realized ideals necessary to the production of narrative.

Like Stein too, Hardy draws attention to the effect of “the composition in which we live” on “the art which we see and hear” (Stein 165). Beginning in typical Hardy fashion, not with character but with setting, the preface to 1897 edition reveals the intimate relationship between the characters of the novel and the environment that produces them. The novel opens with a mystical description of the Isle of Slingers, a “peninsula carved by Time out of a single stone, whereon most of the following scenes are laid” (173). Moving on to describe the kinds of persons, ideas, and interactions this desolate environment gives rise to, the narrator explains that “Fancies, like certain soft-wooded plants which cannot bear the silent inland frosts, but thrive by the sea in the roughest of weather, seem to grow up naturally here, in particular amongst those natives who have no active concern in the labours of the ‘Isle’” (173). Jocelyn, the son of a stone merchant who left the Isle of Slingers for a career as a sculptor in London (181), is the human embodiment of these fantasies, a “fantast” sustained by this harsh environment not unlike the “soft-wooded plants” that subsist in extreme ecosystems (173). The Isle of Slingers, we are told,

is the spot apt to generate a type of personage like the character
imperfectly sketched in these pages—a native of natives—whom some

may choose to call a fantast (if they honour him with their consideration so far), but whom others may see only as one that gave objective continuity and a name to a delicate dream which in a vaguer form is more or less common to all men, and is by no means new to Platonic philosophers. (173)

Fancies and fantast, soft-wooded plants and Jocelyn Pierston; these are the life forms cultivated on the Isle of Slingers, the fictional analogue of Portland, a limestone island off the coast of Dorset. While scholars have long remarked upon the fact that Hardy's environments function as characters with wills of their own, I take this argument a step further to contend that Hardy's settings consciously echo the characteristics of the human beings that they foster, gesturing toward the mutually constitutive nature of environments and the characters that inhabit them.

One of the most striking qualities of the Isle of Slingers is that it is an island of monolithic whiteness. Comprised of oolitic limestone—a white rock comprised by round, egg-like “ooloids”—Hardy's isle is all form and no color. As Jocelyn returns to the isle from London at the novel's start, he is struck by

the unity of the whole island as a solid and single block of limestone four miles long ... All now stood dazzlingly unique and white against the tinted sea, and the sun flashed on infinitely stratified walls of oolite. (179)

Oolite are formed through the gradual accumulation of calcite around individual pieces of sediment such as the skeletal fragments of marine organisms. The mechanism through which oolite forms is uncertain, though researchers have speculated that bacterial film on the surfaces of the ooloids contributes to the accretion of the inorganic chemical precipitate (calcium carbonate). They can be cemented together to form larger rocks such as that which comprises the Isle of Slingers.



Figure 4: Oolite (Schwabe)

The process of oolite formation in which grains or fossil fragments are rolled back and forth by the tide echoes the process of biological generation through which the Avices themselves are produced. Both processes, in this case, are highly cyclical and somewhat insular: the endogamous structure of the island culture means that the Caro family are literally comprised of materials recycled generation to generation. “The three Avices,” the narrator explains,

were the outcome of the immemorial island customs of intermarriage and of prenuptial union, under which conditions the type of feature was almost uniform from parent to child through generations: so that, till quite latterly, to have seen one native man and woman was to have seen the whole population of that isolated rock, so nearly cut off from the mainland. (278)

Their bloodline pure and unbroken given the limited genetic pool of the island inhabitants, the Caros, it is revealed, are the product of centuries of inbreeding. The homogeneity of the ooloids thus also mirrors the homogeneity of the Caro stock. While in the first half of the novel the Well-Beloved represents a kind of mathematical ideal of Beauty, after becoming magnetized to the uniform features of the Caro women, the Well-Beloved begins to gather explicit racial implications. The narrator explains this shift in the Well-Beloved from an idealized form to a particular biological makeup using a metaphor from the plastic arts: “It was as if the Caros had found the clay but not the potter, where other families whose daughters might attract him had found the potter but not the clay” (251). While within the first half of the novel, that is, the particular “matter” of the woman desired is of no consequence, in the second half of the novel, it becomes the case that only Caro family—whose last name has its etymology in the Latin *carō* meaning *flesh* or *fruit*—“possessed the materials for her making” (251).¹²⁴

The problem of biological inheritance struck Hardy as an interesting concept for literary work on February 19, 1889, when he wrote in his diary, “The story of a face which goes through three generations or more, would make a fine novel or poem of the passage of Time. The difference in personality to be ignored” (*Life* 226). Hardy, it turns out, would write both the novel and the poem. What *The Well-Beloved* thematizes in prose, “Heredity” (1917) addresses in verse:

I am the family face;
Flesh perishes, I live on,

¹²⁴ Hardy claimed that “‘Caro’ (like all other surnames) is an imitation of a local name ... this particular modification having been adopted because of its resemblance to the Italian for ‘dear’” (*Life* 304). A hostile reviewer in 1897, however, noted that “*Caro, carnis* [flesh] is the noun with the declension of which Mr. Hardy is perpetually and everlastingly preoccupied in his new book” (cited in *The Well-Beloved* 340, n. 3). Hardy vigorously denied all claims that his final novel was obsessed with the body: “There is more fleshiness in *The Loves of the Triangles* than in this story—at least to me,” he wrote to an editor who requested his response to critics (*Life* 286).

Projecting trait and trace
Through time to times anon,
And leaping from place to place
Over oblivion.

The years-heired feature that can
In curve and voice and eye
Despise the human span
Of durance -- that is I;
The eternal thing in man,
That heeds no call to die
(lines 1–12)

J.B. Bullen has proposed that the answer to the poem's riddle—the “Eternal thing in man / That heeds no call to die”—is “germ plasm,” revealing that Hardy's words here echo those of nineteenth-century German physiologist Johannes Müller, influential in the history of the science of heredity: “Organic bodies are perishable,” explains Müller, “while life maintains the appearance of immortality in constant succession of similar individuals, the individuals pass away” (Müller qtd. in Bullen, “Hardy's” 80).

A follower of Müller, the embryologist August Weismann, described what he called “germ plasm” (*Keimplasma*) as “the undying part of the organism” (Weismann qtd. in Bullen 80). Hardy read Weismann's *Essays on Heredity* (published in English in 1899) in late 1890 (J. H. Miller, *Fiction and Repetition* 169). He also would have encountered such ideas through English scientists like Herbert Spencer, Charles Darwin, and Francis Galton all of whom, influenced by these German thinkers, had developed related theories of the transportation of material “germs,” “gemmules,” or “germ plasm.” In England, In one of the founding texts of the science of heredity, *A Theory of Heredity* (1876), Galton named the structure a “stirp” (derived from *stirpe*, Latin for “root” or “stock”) and defined it as the “sum total of the germs, gemmules, or whatever they may be called, which are to be found ... in the newly fertilized ovum” (“A Theory of Heredity” 330). While all of these thinkers forwarded different theories regarding the

nature these “organic units” likewise reminiscent of Hardy’s oolitic particles, each attempted to name and understand the basic material and regulative mechanisms for what today would be referred to as genetic transmission (Galton 329).

But Bullen’s insights into the role of germ plasm in *The Well-Beloved* overlook the extent to which Hardy’s exploration of the biological structure of heredity is concerned, first and foremost, with race. Notice how, at least initially, the Well-Beloved is associated with no particular physical characteristics whatsoever: “Four times she masqueraded as a brunette, twice as a pale-haired creature, and two or three times under a complexion neither light nor dark” (203). After the death of Avice I, however, things change when the Well-Beloved makes her home in the pale-skinned and light-haired phenotype of “Avice Caro,” and thus become fundamentally associated with this particular set of traits. The “white cubes of oolite” that comprise the island stone here take on a new significance: they figure Jocelyn’s obsession with the purity of a particular racial type (233). References to the whiteness of the women Jocelyn desires abound: Avice II’s “white teeth,” “white neck” (248), and skin “white as the sheets” (279), as well as the “the exceeding fairness of [Nicola Pine-Avon’s] neck and shoulders, which, though unwhitened artificially, were without a speck or blemish of the least degree” (223) (elsewhere the novel references the use of “pearl-powder,” a cosmetic used to whiten skin [222]). That the supposedly contentless form of the Well-Beloved is the veiled embodiment of the ideal of whiteness is clear: after perceiving some “ladies in white cloaks,” for instance, Jocelyn suddenly receives a premonition that the Well-Beloved will visit him that evening (218).

In focusing on the discourse of otherness at work in Hardy’s description of the “strange beliefs and singular customs” of the island natives, critics have overlooked the potential that the Isle of Slingers might actually represent England itself, rather than an

otherworldly (or “othered”) place of fantasy (171).¹²⁵ Jocelyn says of Avice II that he knows the “perfect and pure quarry she was dug from,” implying that as a native islander she is of good racial stock (258). This line is one of those added to the 1897 version, which draws out more strongly the racial implications of Jocelyn’s desire by inserting additional references to the racial lineage of the Caros.¹²⁶ Tim Dolin has drawn attention to the fantasy of racial purity in Angel Clare’s fascination with Tess’ “unsophistication” in *Tess of the d’Urbervilles*, remarking that “Tess and the other dairymaids must, in this fantasy, be virginally English: unspoiled stock of the true race” (“Melodrama” 339). Likewise, I read Jocelyn’s desire for a pure and ideal woman in *The Well-Beloved* as a commentary on the discourses of racial purity that would only become more pronounced in English culture as the century turned. As the eugenicist Robert Reid Rentoul would argue in 1906:

The inter-marriage of British with foreigners should not be encouraged. A few of us know the terrible monstrosities produced by the intermarriage of the white man and black, the white man with the redskin, the white man with the native Hindu, or the white man with the Chinese. From the standpoint of race culture it is difficult to understand the action of those who advocate the naturalization of foreigners. (5)

In racializing Jocelyn’s desire for the pure form of the Well-Beloved, Hardy’s novel resists the newly emergent scientific paradigm in which “race” signifies the essentialized materiality of dark-skinned bodies. As *The Well-Beloved* will imply through

¹²⁵ One exception here is Richardson who remarks that “Portland is a microcosmic figuring of an imperial head-quarters. A bastion of nationality,” she points out “it is home to a breed which has worked continually to resist contamination from the mainland” (326).

¹²⁶ A significant addition to the 1892 edition is a paragraph detailing the Caros “Roman lineage, more or less grafted on the stock of the Slingers” (232). “What so natural as that the true star of his soul would be found nowhere but in one of the old island breed?” the passage ends (232).

its emphasis on the histories and environments that produce all bodies as *mixtures*, race is not an ahistorical essence, but rather a historically contingent and inessential category of thought produced through the conceptual isolation of bodies from their material context. In this, I want to suggest, the novel can be seen as undercutting the discourse of race that emerged in the eighteenth century with the increased movement of bodies in colonialism as well as other forms of migration and travel. As the historians of science Stefan Müller-Wille and Hans Jörg Rheinberger have demonstrated, the science of heredity emerged not, as one might expect, out of a fascination with the similarities between parents and their offspring, but rather from a desire to suppress and control variations produced through changes in environment. As they explain,

the knowledge of heredity started to unfold where people, objects, and relationship among them were set into motion ... Mobilizing plants and animals, for instance, was a precondition for being able to distinguish between inherited and environmentally induced traits in organisms. Only when organisms were actually removed from their natural and traditional agricultural habitats could environmental differences manifest themselves in trait differences, and only then could heritable traits manifest their steadiness against a background of environmental change. (16–17)

Müller-Wille and Rheinberger contend that the desire to maintain regularity and consistency in the face of variation drove early attempts to understand the mechanisms through which traits were passed on from generation to generation. As they write, “Only when these [environmental] ties were dissolved in favor of a variety of relationships between forms, places, and modes of transmission did a need arise for a complex metaphor like heredity to be applied in order to account for the proliferating phenomena of change and stability” (18).

The mobilizing forces of globalization, colonialism, and immigration were integral to the emergence of skin color in particular as one of the major markers for physical difference. As Irene Tucker demonstrates in *The Moment of Racial Sight* (2012), a dermatological conception of racial difference arose in part due to the supplanting of the humoral model of medicine in which bodily traits were understood to be products of one's environment with an anatomical model in which such traits were stabilized *within* the body as part of the standardization of medical practice. In the humoral model, Tucker explains, a conception of the body as highly sensitive and affectable to outside forces often accompanied theories of skin color as the product of environment:

The mixture of blood, phlegm, black bile, and yellow bile determining not only one's immediate condition of health but also one's more general temperament could be affected, either deliberately or unwittingly, by the proportions of heat, cold, wetness, or dryness in the environment. These same environmental forces worked to produce the bodily characteristics by which geographically proximate peoples might be grouped together: Africans, for example, were understood to have dark skins and excitable dispositions that manifested the hot, sunny, and wet environment in which they lived. (26)

Like Müller-Wille and Rheinberger, who describe the emergence of a science of heredity thanks to the "obsession of the scientific mind with regularity at the expense of contingency and complexity" (16), Tucker reveals how the shift from the environmentalist conception of human difference to a biologized racial science occurs not because of a fascination with difference itself, but rather with sameness. Contending that with the emergence of the anatomical model that standardized the insides of the bodies, skin became significant for its capacity to body forth effects of prior causes, she argues

that “we begin to notice and to care deeply about the color of other people’s skin at the moment in history we understand our bodies to be ... fundamentally like other people’s bodies” (13). As an “immediately visible sign,” skin becomes useful for organizing perceptions of likeness and difference integral to the standardization of medicine.

Hardy’s 1897 addition of the subtitle “A Sketch of Temperament” to *The Well-Beloved* highlights the extent to which the novel understands character not in terms of the new racial paradigm in which skin signals a depth of essentialized difference, but instead as a mixture or composition, a physical constitution affected in part by environment (“Temperament”). Where Jocelyn is said to have been “generated” by his surroundings, the Avices, it is explained, derive from “some mysterious ingredient sucked from the isle” (232). In stressing the deep interconnection between character and environment, however, Hardy’s novel does not simply look back to the Medieval humoral model of the body. Instead, I want to suggest, it harbors an ecological and historically informed theory of character formation, one that suggests an alternative to the conceptual abstraction of “race” as a category for typing bodies that would still account for physiological difference.

In 1874 John Morely remarked upon the effect of his understanding of history as geologically layered: “Character is considered less with reference to its absolute qualities than as an interesting scene with scattered rudiments, survivals and inherited predispositions” (24). Like Morley, who spatializes the history of character into “an interesting scene” onto which the rudiments of the past emerge to color the present, Hardy projects the history of the island inhabitants onto the stratified rock of their isle. His descriptions of the processes of calcite accretion, mining, and sculpting that the limestone rock itself undergoes themselves indicate the protracted, material history of the island people. The rock itself is historically central to the livelihood of the isle

inhabitants, with the Pierston and the Caro families having long worked in the quarrying business, and the houses are “built of solid stone ... with mullions, copings, and corbels complete” (171). But more than this, the rock embodies the racial and colonial history of the isle, as Hardy’s descriptions of its material composition make clear.

As the historian Antoinette Burton has gone to great lengths to show, the notion (still prevalent in Victorian studies) that England ever was a racially or culturally homogenous nation is itself a fantasy, a fantasy of inside/outside home/away that “was itself a technology of imperial rule” (Burton 28). In a recent review essay entitled “Islands of Whiteness,” Elaine Freedgood turns to Burton and other historians of empire in order to remind that “Britain, like the United States, is of course a nation of immigrants, an incredible mix of ‘races’ and peoples from its inception” (“Islands of Whiteness” 299). As she points out,

Britain thus has several postcolonial histories that have been variously internalized: the defeat of the roman empire by invaders; the assimilation of Anglo-Saxon “settlers” as natives; the long throwing off of the “Norman Yoke;” and then the British empire, modeled on Rome, but aware of the various causes of the decline of that empire. (“Islands of Whiteness” 299)

For Freedgood, Hardy’s novels are one place where Victorian literary scholars can see this colonial history referenced and preserved. In Hardy, she writes, “historical periods seem to exist in a kind of sedimentation in characters and landscapes in which time moves at varying speeds, so that the colonized past of England is remembered in various names, places, and festivals, even if it is consciously forgotten” (300).

The documentation of the movements of bodies that produced the physiology and characterology of Victorian England stands at the heart of Hardy’s project in *The Well-*

Beloved, a novel in which the geological record of the rock preserves in its fossil fragments of the racial and colonial history of England, “Norman, Anglian, Roman, Balearic-British” (Hardy, *Well-Beloved* 232). Thus, to gloss Hardy’s opening lines once more, we see that although the monolithic isle appears like a “unity... dazzlingly unique and white against the tinted sea,” upon closer inspection, it is “infinitely stratified” (179). The stratified layers of Hardy’s isle, however, I shall argue in closing, are not merely a ledger to be unearthed by archeologists or interpreted by historians. These material accretions are not merely remnants or remainders of a history past, but are history itself. Just as for Ruskin, the surface of the architectural monument does not merely record the building’s history, but produces, through encounters with living organisms, affective experience in the present, Hardy’s writing, in its very form, gestures toward this back-and-forth of historical-material experience.

THE POETICS OF SURFACE

In 1856, at age sixteen, Hardy began working for a local architect, and he continued to work in the field until the 1870s. During these years, England was undertaking a massive project of architectural restoration, focused largely on ecclesiastical monuments, and Hardy participated in several major church restorations.¹²⁷ But Hardy’s experiences eventually led him to become critical of the process of restoration with its commitment to preserving the original form of the monument through the replacement of decaying or outdated materials. In this, Hardy took cues from Ruskin, who polemically argued that the practice was equivalent to the destruction of the building. In *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, he argues that restoration is

¹²⁷ At its height, between 1840 and 1873, 7,144 churches were restored, with fully half of England’s medieval churches affected (Tschudi-Madsen 24).

the most total destruction which a building can suffer: a destruction out of which no remnants can be gathered . . . it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful in architecture (8: 242, emphasis in original).

Like Ruskin, Hardy would argue that restoration destroys the architectural monument, erasing its history in the attempt to produce an eternal present. An ardent anti-restorationist activist in his later years, Hardy eventually joined William Morris' anti-restorationist Society for the Preservation of Ancient Buildings, delivering an impassioned address to its members in 1906. The address, published in *Cornhill Magazine* later that year under the title "Memories of Church Restoration," followed Ruskin in decrying the effacement of the historical life of the monument through the replacement of decaying or outdated materials.

Restorationists, the lecture contends, believe that "the essence and soul of an architectural monument does not lie in the particular blocks of stone or timber that compose it, but in the mere forms to which those materials have been shaped" ("Memories" 104). Against those who insist that the soul of the church lies not in "limestones or sandstones have passed into its form," but rather in "an idea independently of them—an aesthetic phantom without solidity which might as just suitably have chosen millions of other stones from the quarry"—Hardy advocates for a preservationist practice that would pay homage to the ephemeral materiality of the structure as a lived and living space (104). As he maintains, an "indefinable quality" is imparted by workers onto the monument through their engagement with its unique materiality: "No man can make two pieces of matter exactly alike," Hardy avers, relishing in the fact that the hand-struck engravings of medieval churches always express "some deviation from exact geometry" (105). Where restorationists aspire to the "reproduction of old shapes in substituted

materials,” Hardy celebrates the unique texture and uneven surfaces of material bodies, the irregularity of which, he contends, is more important to preserve than their ideal form (103-4).

Hardy’s depiction of the form of the architectural monument as “an aesthetic phantom without solidity which might just as suitably have chosen millions of other stones from the quarry” is of course reminiscent of Jocelyn’s quest in *The Well-Beloved* to reanimate “the phantom of a dead woman whom he never adored in her lifetime”—the original Avicé. As Ruskin prognosticates, however, “it is *impossible*, as impossible as to raise the dead, to restore anything that has ever been great or beautiful.” As a critique of the fantasy of the transcendence of form, *Well-Beloved* might thus be read as a Ruskinian tale of the impossibility of restoration, what Hardy calls “the reproduction of old shapes in substituted materials.” In his experimentation with literary form, however, Hardy does something that Ruskin’s architectural writings do not: he insists upon the political import of the preservationist’s approach to history. In his forthcoming article on Hardy’s preservationist approach to history in *Jude*, Benjamin Cannon suggests that, for Hardy, “preservation understands history as an open-ended production of meaning, one whose very unpredictability means that it can only be made sense of through the traces it leaves upon the material world” (2). Following Cannon, I want to stress that the materiality of any structure or body, for Hardy, is not simply the place where the past is inscribed or documented, but rather, because of its accretive tendency, the site always of future meanings.

One of the most common practices in restoration at the time, called scraping, entailed smoothing down the surface of the monument in order to remove bacterial growth and erase signs of aging. This elimination of surface inconsistencies, Ruskin argued, was a gross injustice, in that it erased the very character of the monument itself.

In Hardy's turn-of-the-century poetry, likewise, the erasure of the traumas of history is denounced as a political instrument of the state. We see this most clearly in a poem published not long after *The Well-Beloved*, "On an Invitation to the United States" (1899):

My ardours for emprise nigh lost
Since Life has bared its bones to me,
I shrink to seek a modern coast
Whose riper times have yet to be;
Where the new regions claim them free
From that long drip of human tears
Which peoples old in tragedy
Have left upon the centuried years.

For, winning in these ancient lands,
Enchased and lettered as a tomb,
And scored with prints of perished hands,
And chronicled with dates of doom,
Though my own Being bear no bloom
I trace the lives such scenes enshrine,
Give past exemplars present room,
And their experience count as mine. (1–16)

Scholars have long failed to notice in these lines what I believe to be a reference to the Trail of Tears—the dislocation and ethnic cleansing of indigenous peoples following the Native American Removal Act of 1830—and thus have read "On an Invitation to the United States" as an expression of Hardy's preference for the Old over the New World.

But the poem is not, as Ian Ousby has suggested, a lamentation of “America’s lack of history” (“Past” 6). Quite the opposite, it undercuts this very suggestion. Importantly, the poem never claims that America is actually bereft of a historical past. Its “new regions” merely “*claim* them free / From that long drip of human tears / Which peoples old in tragedy / Have left upon the centuried years” (emphasis mine). The poem can thus be read as a critique of the ideology of settler colonialism, which, not only effects the elimination of indigenous people, but erases the very trace of their prior existence by purporting that a land has no history prior to the arrival of its settlers.

Through the repetition of the clauses that commence the second stanza then, the author whose “own Being” is said to “bear no bloom,” becomes a medium for restoring of these traumas into the present. Bodying forth the suppressed history these “ancient lands,” the speaker himself becomes the page or stone on which these traumas are inscribed. Like the documents and objects he describes, he is “enchased,” “lettered,” “scored,” and “chronicled,” (the word “enchased,” suggesting the idea of ornamentation, the setting of a jewel on the surface or inlay [“enchase, v2”]). The speaker here does not internalize the past’s traumas; he externalizes them, giving them “present room.” His writing, one might say, is an aesthetic act of presentation—or even of ornamentation, as what has been scraped away is re-presented on the surface for its readers to touch, feel, and experience, rather than forget or ignore.

Andrew Radford has suggested that Hardy seems always to “find irrefutable evidence of the destructiveness of history” (5). I am arguing just the opposite: that both history and history-making, for Hardy, are accretive, and that these accretions lead always to the production of new meanings. Even acts of negation like weathering, decay, or loss, are in Hardy’s historical schema “positive” in that they leave their mark upon the present that thus can be affectively experienced and interpreted by observers. The

question is merely whether these markings will be erased, preserved, or elaborated on. Hardy's poetics of surface, I have been arguing, privileges elaboration. His line breaks forming a kind of strata, "On an Invitation to the United States"—indeed, many of his poems—can be seen to reproduce, in their very form, such an accretive temporality. In his autobiography *The Life of Thomas Hardy* (written in the third person) Hardy remarks upon this ornamental aspect of his poetry, turning to "the analogy of architecture" in order to explain the "poetic texture" of his verse:

He knew that in architecture cunning irregularity is of enormous worth, and it is obvious that he carried on into his verse, perhaps unconsciously, the Gothic art principle in which he had been trained—the principle of spontaneity, found in mouldings, tracery, and such-like. (*Life* 323)

In closing, I thus want to suggest that poetry may have been for Hardy the form through which he could best ornament history, elaborating on its designs by creating yet further differentiated surfaces in the present. He arrived to poetry however, both historically and formally, through *The Well-Beloved*, in which narrative repetition effects something similar to the lineated temporalities of his verse: the production of a certain liveliness or spontaneity. In the *Life* Hardy recalls a trip to Italy whereupon he visited, with great anticipation, various of the sites described by Ruskin in his architectural writings. In Rome, Hardy "began to feel, he frequently said, its measureless layers of history to lie upon him like a physical weight" (*Life* 195).

The time of their visit was not so long after the peeling of the Coliseum and other ruins of their vast accumulations of parasitic growths, which, though Hardy as an architect defended the much deplored process on the score of its absolute necessity if the walls were to be preserved, he yet

wished it had not been taken in hand till after his inspection of them. (*Life* 195-6)

Though he admits its necessity in the service of preservation, Hardy cannot but lament the scraping of the parasitic growths from the surface of the monument. The surface for Hardy was far from a neutral field, a blank sheet onto which cultural and biological histories were inscribed. The stone of the monument itself, hospitable to the lichens that grow upon it, receptive to dents and weathering, was an active site of transformation, and thus a site where social and political meanings were apt to emerge.

In my final chapter, I explore in greater depth the philosophical relationship between the ontological and political by turning to the work of the New Woman novelist Olive Schreiner. Hardy's novels borrow various tropes and strategies from the genre of the New Woman novel, and thus we discover in Schreiner's final novel, *From Man to Man; or Perhaps Only* (posthumously published in 1926) a reflection of Hardy's commitment to rendering visible the ethics of literary description. While my chapters on Eliot and Hardy worked to excavate philosophies of matter, embodiment, and agency from within realist description, my final chapter returns to the more explicit philosophizing of the New Woman novel. Examining what might be better characterized as a work of philosophy—a fifty-page fictionalized diary entry interpolated within the body of a novel—I flesh out the theoretical implications of what I am calling Schreiner's "pulsating metaphysics" for the history of feminism and anti-racism.

CHAPTER FIVE: Schreiner's Pulsating Metaphysics: *From Man to Man* and the Philosophy of Relation

When Olive Schreiner first arrived in England from South Africa in 1881 at age 26, she was carrying the manuscripts of three novels with her. One of them, a semi-autobiographical work about growing up as a young woman on the South African Karoo, entitled *Story of an African Farm* (1883), would render her a British literary sensation. Published two years after her arrival in England, the novel was a path-breaking work that refused to satisfy the English curiosity about Africa, with tales of “of wild adventure; of cattle driven into inaccessible kranzes by Bushmen; ‘of encounters with ravening lions, and hair-breadth escapes’” as she quipped in the Preface to the 1891 edition (xl). *Story of an African Farm* placed Schreiner at the center of London’s intellectual culture, granting her entry to progressive clubs like the Men and Women’s Club, and it would found a new genre—the New Woman novel. The other two works she was carrying with her, *Undine* and *Saints and Sinners*, she would never finish. Schreiner had hoped the latter novel—which she later retitled *From Man to Man; or Perhaps Only* (1926)—would be her magnum opus.¹²⁸ It occupied Schreiner for over fifty years, from the early 1870s until 1920, when she died leaving it unfinished. Her letters reveal the importance this novel for her thinking: “every word of it is truth to me,” she wrote to her good friend, the sexologist Havelock Ellis in 1886, “& more & more so as the book goes on.” But writing became difficult as she faced problems with her health. “I don’t quite know what’s the matter with me,” she writes in the same letter, “I’m so much knocked down. Will my

¹²⁸ Schreiner submitted *Saints and Sinners* to Chapman and Hall in 1881 before submitting *Story of an African Farm* to any publishers for consideration. Chapman and Hall rejected the book, however, as Macmillan would later do as well (van der Vlies 247). For more on the early manuscript of *From Man to Man*, see Ravilious. Liz Stanley isolates four major periods of revision, from 1844 to 1886, from mid 1888 to spring 1889, from 1901 to 1902, and from 1906 to 1907; the manuscript was retyped in 1911 (95).

book ever ever ever be done?” Schreiner would not live to see the publication of *From Man to Man*. Her husband, Samuel Cronwright-Schreiner, published the novel six years after her death in its inchoate form.¹²⁹ Since then, the book has met with little reception, receiving only a handful of mentions even in scholarship focused on the New Woman novel.¹³⁰

From Man to Man develops many themes also treated in Schreiner’s more famous novel, *The Story of an African Farm*: the suppression of female sexuality, the desire for intellectual life, and the colonial situation in South Africa. Originally published under the pseudonym Ralph Iron, *The Story of an African Farm* paved the way for writers like George Egerton, Sarah Grand, George Gissing, and Mona Caird, all New Women novelists whose work politically engaged “the woman question” in the 1880s and 90s. Like other novels of this period, *From Man to Man* expresses frustration with the lack of sexual and intellectual options available to women. It tells the story of two sisters, Rebekah and Bertie, who grow up in the Eastern Province of the Cape Colony and move on to experience the trials of modern womanhood in Cape Town and London, respectively. Where Rebekah becomes an isolated housewife after marrying her cousin, Frank, her sister Bertie is socially ostracized after a sexual experience with her tutor, eventually turning to prostitution. As the title of the novel suggests, these two women are trafficked “from man to man” in a world in which they are denied social and political independence.

But the title of Schreiner’s novel has another, more positive valence. Its prepositional structure gestures toward what I am calling Schreiner’s “philosophy of relation”—a metaphysical theory of inter-racial, intra-gender, and inter-species

¹²⁹ Upon their marriage in 1894 Cronwright took Schreiner’s name. She did not take his.

¹³⁰ Welcome exceptions include Burdett, Monsman, Heilmann, Knechtel, and Snaith.

connectivity developed throughout the novel in a series of powerful, essayistic moments, passages that we might today recognize as an early form of intersectional feminist theory. Weaving metaphysics, physics, and ethics together into poetic essays that explore the nature of the universe, Schreiner's character Rebekah makes the philosophical argument that the structure of reality is fundamentally relational. She positions her philosophy of relation against conceptions of the universe as "a thing of shreds and patches and unconnected parts," which she argues, ultimately gives rise to an individualism "concentrated on personal aim" (179, 219). As Rebekah argues, thinking in terms of interconnecting *forces*, rather than in terms of separate *things* or even *particles*, opens up new political possibilities for ontology. Grounding her feminist and anti-racist ethics in a vision of the world comprised of "internetting lines of action and reaction," she suggests that a dynamic and relational view of the universe allows one to account for the interactive, and thus always ethical quality of the world (180).

Elaborating upon the argument made in chapter one of the dissertation, I show how *From Man to Man*, like other New Woman novels, cultivates an embodied form of philosophy that poses and answers philosophical questions through novelistic description. In the first part of this chapter, I highlight the novel's interventions into evolutionary theory, revealing Schreiner's commitment to drawing out the political implications of theories of the natural world. My second section then shows how Schreiner realist aesthetic emerges from the very same principle that drives her critique of individualist ontologies: her philosophy of relation. In conversation with George Eliot, I argue, Schreiner cultivates realism based on peripatetic attention to worldly interaction and connection. *From Man to Man* moves seamlessly from scientific and philosophical issues to everyday life, from metaphysics to ethics and back again. I read this constant shifting of registers in my third section not as a failure to distinguish between ontology,

epistemology, and ethics, but rather as a conscious attempt to produce what the contemporary philosopher Karen Barad calls an ethico-onto-epistemology, a philosophy that holds that matter and meaning cannot be separated. Prefiguring Barad, who argues that “ethics is about mattering, about taking into account the entangled materializations of which we are a part,” Schreiner insists that matter itself is not pre-social or pre-political, but rather demands a kind of responsiveness to the other—from whom one is never separate, but always intimately connected (“Interview” 69).

THE ETHICS OF NATURE

Demonstrating a fascination with the natural world from a young age, Schreiner’s protagonist, Rebekah, grows up finding in the behavior of animals and plants echoes of human life. As an adult, she develops these connections into a full-fledged cosmology, which she composes at night sequestered in a small room, filled with microscopes and fossils. The seventh chapter of *From Man to Man*, “Raindrops on the Avenue,” reveals the impressive extent of Rebekah’s philosophical thinking, providing a window into the intellectual life that this mother of five maintains despite her extensive domestic duties. In a diary entry interpolated within the body of the novel, Rebekah draws from research across fields as various as archeology, physics, anthropology, ancient philosophy, and evolutionary theory, in order to develop a feminist philosophy of care grounded in empirical observations about the natural and physical world.¹³¹ Her primary goal is to undercut the suggestion that evolution is motored principally by force of competition

¹³¹ Feminist care ethics originated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the work of thinkers like Mary Wollstonecraft, Catherine Beecher, and Elizabeth Cady Stanton. Schreiner continues in this tradition of cultivating an ethics based in the practice of mothering and parenting, critiquing the ideal of the autonomous individual, while at the same time questioning the biological alignment of women with collectivity and care and men with autonomy and self-making. See Tong for more on the history of care-focused feminism.

resulting in “the survival of the fittest.” Against those who would overlook the principle of care in favor of the principle of competition, Rebekah argues that all entities are interconnected and co-constitutive, and thus that nature demands a constant care for the other. The result is one of the most important, and yet overlooked, philosophical critiques of biological racism and sexism of the period.

Following the publication of Herbert Spencer’s *Principles of Biology* in 1864, Spencer’s phrase “survival of the fittest” was repeatedly invoked to explain why the extinction of “lower races” at the hands of the “advanced races” was natural and inevitable. Much more than a descriptive *theory*, it effected the removal of indigenous peoples, inspired missionary efforts, justified free-market capitalism, and lent support to various forms of social Darwinism as well as its offshoot, eugenics.¹³² As Patrick Brantlinger explains, “The social Darwinist vision of history is one of race war, with the ‘survival of the fittest’ as the outcome” (220n6). While Darwin himself never advocated an active eugenics program, his writings lent themselves to the interpretation that racial progress was inevitable and that social competition would fuel it. As he put it in *The Descent of Man* (1871), the book in which he too began to embrace some of the tenets of his social Darwinist followers: “At some future period, not very distant as measured by centuries, the civilised races of man will almost certainly exterminate, and replace, the savage races throughout the world” (183).¹³³

¹³² The originator of eugenics, Darwin’s cousin, Francis Galton, defined eugenics as “the science of improving stock, which is by no means confined to questions of judicious mating, but which, especially in the case of man, takes cognisance of all influences that tend in however remote a degree to give to the more suitable races or strains of blood a better chance of prevailing speedily over the less suitable than they otherwise would have had” (25n1). Not all social Darwinists supported eugenics; some opposed the practice, contending that active intervention into the evolutionary process would only weaken the species.

¹³³ Schreiner was surely familiar with the claims of Darwin’s *Descent* even before she left South Africa for England. The book was reviewed in *Cape Monthly Magazine* the year it was published, and, as Saul Dubow has noted, “The publication of Darwin’s *Descent of Man* (1871) appears to have exerted a significantly greater impact on the Cape’s reading public than *The Origin of Species* (1859)” (97).

Schreiner's novel launches a critique of the suggestion that "we should forcibly suppress, cut off and destroy the less developed individuals and races, leaving only the highly developed to survive" (196).¹³⁴ Drawing from her own experience as a mother, her extensive research into evolutionary theory, as well as her own work as an amateur naturalist in Cape Colony, her protagonist Rebekah argues that the force of "love and expansion of the ego to others" are more basic to life than competition (209). One sees this force at work in the mother-child relationship, which Rebekah dwells on for some time, but this basic onto-ethical principle is not limited to mothers; it is rather "a much wider feeling for the weak, which makes possible much of the higher animal life about us" (210). Breaking down the assumption that care is an essentially feminine quality, she writes:

You may say that mother-love forms an exception in the rule of nature, which, for perfecting life, demands the destruction of the weak by the strong. But what of the protective care of the male, not only of his own young and his related females, but of all the most helpless of his group? (210).

Arguing against those who would see an individualist competition as the reigning principle of nature, Rebekah draws attention to instances of care and creativity in the natural world. She gives the example of the mierkat, who always save the younger, smaller and more helpless when a hawk approaches, without fear for themselves. It is, she insists, "this creative (and not the destructive) power" that is the fundamental

¹³⁴ See Dubow for more on how eugenic science was discussed and employed in South Africa at the turn of the century. As he points out, "reappraisals of the underlying racial affinities between Boers and Britons were intended to assist in the goal of securing a future of a united 'white man's country'" in the early years of the twentieth century, a shift that "entailed a corresponding stress on the need for more systematic separation of whites and blacks" (177).

principle of nature (214). “To attempt to explain and sum up life by considering [only the element of competition and struggle],” she argues, is to act

like the man who should attempt to represent a great musical symphony by playing its lower notes alone, like a man who should try to reproduce a great composer’s masterpiece by striking all the discords in it without any of the harmonies into which they resolve themselves and with reference to which alone they have any meaning. (213)

Such harmonious moments of love and care for the other capture our attention less than moments of conflict and competition; however, this only proves their universality in contrast to the exception of violence and self-love.

As Daniel Rigney has explained, in “emphasizing competition as an evolutionary process,” social Darwinists such as Herbert Spencer “understated the evolutionary value of cooperation within and among species as a means of survival” (27). Given a copy of Spencer’s *First Principles* (1862) in her youth, Schreiner was initially compelled by the biologist’s description of human society as one great organism whose parts were consistently evolving, but mutually interdependent. In a letter to Havelock Ellis, she recounts the profound effect of Spencer’s thinking on her worldview: “He helped me to believe in a unity underlying all nature,” she explains (“To Havelock Ellis” 8 April 1884). Spencer himself had made room for altruism in his theory of evolution, claiming that *both* competition and cooperation drove racial process, and Schreiner’s insistence on a harmony between the two principles in *From Man to Man* can be seen to reflect this aspect of this thought. But, as Carolyn Burdett has pointed out, Schreiner eventually backed away from the radical implications of Spencer’s theories, which, as the century progressed, were increasingly interpreted to champion only the spirit of competition (28-

9).¹³⁵ As Schreiner's thinking matured, she eventually turned away from Spencer entirely, writing Ellis in 1884 that "he has nothing else to give me now" ("To Havelock Ellis" 8 April 1884).

Like her socialist contemporaries (Schreiner was close friends with Eleanor Marx), Schreiner believed that tremendous energy was lost through "the individual tendency to expend force" in competition when it could be used to improve the whole in collaboration (218). Likewise, against an individualism "concentrated on personal aim" (219), her character Rebekah proposes an ethics of care that would recognize the intense mutual dependence of things: something not unlike what Judith Butler calls "precarity," the notion that we are all "implicated in a set of networks that either sustain us or fail to do so" (Butler). Rebekah asks,

Is it not a paradox covering a mighty truth that not one slave toils under the lash on an Indian plantation but the freedom of every other man on earth is limited by it? ... That the full all-around human life is impossible to any individual while one man lives who does not share it? (194)

The interconnection Rebekah sees as structuring the universe demands a kind of care for the other, so reliant are things upon one another. If, as Rebekah argues, we "nowhere find an isolated existence," we need to recognize the effects of our actions (181). Her thinking here reflects George Henry Lewes' suggestion that

Nothing exists in itself and for itself; everything in others and for others: *ex-ist-ens*—a standing out relation. Hence the search after *the thing in itself* is chimerical: the thing being a group of relations, it is what these are. Hence the highest form of existence is Altruism, or that moral and

¹³⁵ As Burdett explains, "while Spencer's influence is detectable ... in the emphasis on global and holistic development in *From Man to Man*, the Spencerian doctrines of struggle, competitiveness and survival are untiringly criticized and condemned" (29).

intellectual condition which is determined by the fullest consciousness—
emotional and cognitive—of relations. (*Problems* 2: 26–7)

Like Lewes, who reasons that if everything exists in relation to something else, altruism, and not agonism, is “the highest form of existence,” Rebekah proposes an ethics of care that would recognize the interconnectedness of all things (219).

That Rebekah so often grounds her arguments about human sociality in theories and observations of the natural world might seem counterintuitive from our contemporary perspective. Although cultural critique has become a main vehicle for feminist and anti-racist ethics, however, as Cynthia Eagle Russett has explained, “Only at the very end of the century, did cultural interpretations begin to achieve respectability; prior to that time they were simply dismissed as unscientific” (13). Given the “enormous prestige of science and the universal acceptance of its authoritative status in matters of sex difference,” Russett shows, nineteenth-century feminists often “tried to confront scientific anti-feminism on its own terms” (13). While I agree with Russett’s overarching thesis, I want to stress the extent to which Schreiner’s novel goes out of its way to think with rather than against science. In rendering her protagonist a naturalist—and a feminist—Schreiner demonstrates her passionate belief in the power of observation of the natural and physical world to ground social and political critique. Rather than arguing, for instance, that scientific theory operates in a realm entirely separate from the social and political—that while Darwin’s theories apply to “nature,” they in no way apply to “culture”—Rebekah advocates more empirically sound theories of nature in order to develop more informed theories of culture, and vice versa.

As Rebekah will insist, there is no such thing as an apolitical theory of nature. The moment we begin to describe the universe is the moment we open up our thinking to the political. For this reason, it matters which metaphors, which epistemological rubrics,

and which concepts we use when we interpret and theorize nature. Where atomistic and agonistic figures highlight the competitive aspects of life, Rebekah employs an organist vocabulary in order to highlight interconnection and relation. For her, to view human society as an assemblage of relations is to realize that what has emerged from the oppression of some for the benefit of others is not a natural order in which the fittest are surviving; it is an unhealthy and unbalanced ecosystem in which but a small percentage are flourishing at the cost of many:

All the civilizations of the past, in Egypt, in Assyria, in Persia, in India, what had they been but the blossoming of a minute, abnormally situated, abnormally nourished class, unsupported by any vital connection with the classes beneath them or the nations around? (191)

Rebekah stresses that the growth of the whole is always limited when some are left behind. Of the “abnormally nourished classes,” she continues,

What had they resembled but the long, thin, tender, feathery, green shoots which our small rose trees sometimes send out in spring, rising far into the air, but which we know long before the summer is over will have broken and fallen, not because they have grown to a height which no rose tree can ever attain, for ultimately the whole rose tree may be much higher than the shoot, but because they have shot out too far before their fellow-branches to make permanence possible. (191)

In this metaphor the shoots of the rose tree, while higher than that of the mass of the tree, must always break off because “having no support, wind and weather will sooner or later do their work and snap them off or wither them” (191). In Rebekah’s organicist vision, all things are interconnected like organs in a body: to injure one part is to injure the whole.

Importantly, however, as Ruth Knechtel has observed, although “Schreiner plays with connection and unity,” in “celebrating multiplicity ... she also retains a sense of difference” (260). Against those who see only certain traits as desirable for the human race, Rebekah’s diary entries advocate for the fundamental equality and right to flourishing of all people and traits (196). She tackles the rampant biological racism of her era directly and unflinchingly: “Is there really any superiority at all implied in degrees of pigmentation, and are the European races, except in their egoistic distortion of imagination, more desirable or highly developed than the Asiatic?” Rebekah asks (202). Her answer is a resounding “no,” and she attacks any other such answer from various angles. One of Rebekah’s most powerful points is all that appears to be superior and “civilized” about Western and Northern Europe was built on the backs of those they deem “savage;” “when we look around us on what we call our civilization,” she writes, “how little is really ours alone and not drawn from the great stream of human labours and creation so largely non-European?” (203). The theory of “the survival of the fittest” might here have been invoked by the social Darwinist to justify the oppression of the non-European, who, weaker than his oppressor, should bend to the will of the more “fit to survive.” As Rebekah argues, however, in a rather Nietzschean move, weakness, while often mistaken for *cause* of oppression, is actually its *effect*. The so-called inferiority of women, she argues elsewhere, is not an inherent but rather an acquired trait, borne of women’s historic oppression. Rebekah does not deny that many women appear weak; however, she argues that women have merely learned how to *perform* this weakness as a tool for survival in a world that has prevented them from developing more explicit forms of power. “Because the stronger sex has so perpetually attempted to crush the physically smaller,” she theorizes, “the individuals who attempted to resist force by force being at once wiped out,” women have acquired meekness and servility “almost as a secondary

sexual characteristic” (219).

Demonstrating the mutually constitutive nature of all forms of oppression, Rebekah’s essay marks an important historical moment in intersectional feminist theory.¹³⁶ Nineteenth-century evolutionary discourse drew frequent parallels between women and “savage races,” both of which were understood as less developed than the modern, European male. As Russett explains, in the eyes of many Victorian scientists, “women had lagged behind men, much as ‘primitive people’ lagged behind Europeans” (11). Rebekah addresses this comparison, not by distinguishing the modern, European women from her primitive counterpart, but by showing that the same logic that justifies the oppression of the non-European by the European motivates the oppression of women, and by critiquing that logic. In both instances, Rebekah shows, the oppressor believes that oppression is justified due to the inherent inferiority of the oppressed. But oppression, Rebekah contends, turning the language of social Darwinism on its head, does not stem from natural inequalities; it creates and sustains inequality, thus injuring humanity as a whole. Returning to the context of sexual inequality, she writes:

“What has humanity not lost by the suppression and subjection of the weaker sex by the muscularly strong sex alone? We have a Shakespeare; but what of the possible Shakespeares we might have had, who passed their life from youth upward brewing currant wine and making pastries for fat country squires to eat ... stifled out without one line written, simply

¹³⁶ See Crenshaw’s “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory, and Antiracist Politics” for a foundational theory of intersectionality (1989). Crenshaw’s argument is prefigured in twentieth-century black feminist collectives like the Combahee River Collective and writers like bell hooks, as well as nineteenth-century thinkers like Sojourner Truth.

because, being of the weaker sex, life gave no room for action and grasp on life?" (219)

Those familiar with Virginia Woolf's speculations about Shakespeare's imaginary sister in her groundbreaking essay "A Room of One's Own" (1929)—published two years after Schreiner's novel—will recognize what I believe to be the source text for Woolf's famous essay on the loss of talent, power, and art and as a result of women's obstacles to education and employment. "Women," Woolf argues, "have not had a dog's chance of writing poetry" without five-hundred a year and a room of their own (*Room* 106). Woolf's essay tells the story of Shakespeare's imaginary sister, who dies unknown as a result of obstacles to education and employment although she is as talented as her brother; Schreiner's novel makes a similar point by showcasing a life and a body of writing relegated to a woman's diary.

Like Woolf too, who demonstrates the necessity of "room for action and grasp on life" for the production of women's intellectual work, Schreiner emphasizes the material conditions for the production of women's writing.¹³⁷ Rebekah's work is made possible by the existence of a small *room of her own* "made by cutting off the end of the children's bedroom with a partition" (171), a makeshift study that, as at least one scholar has noted, "bears an uncanny likeness" to the room Woolf would describe two years later (Kortsch

¹³⁷ Woolf was characteristically reserved in her praise of Schreiner, calling her feminist precursor a "rather distant and unfamiliar figure" and "one half of a great writer" (qtd. in Pierpont 26). She was, however, thoroughly engaged with Schreiner's work, and in a review of Cronwright's *The Letters of Olive Schreiner* (1924), described her as "the equal of our greatest novelists" and "too uncompromising a figure to be disposed of" (qtd. in Pierpont 26). That Woolf had been thinking about the conditions for Shakespeare's success prior to the publication of Schreiner's *From Man to Man* is clear from two published letters written by Woolf to the *New Statesman* in October 1920. In the second letter Woolf writes, "It seems to me that the conditions that make it possible for a Shakespeare to exist are that he shall have had predecessors in his art, shall make one of a group where art is freely discussed and practiced, and shall himself have the utmost of freedom and action and experience" (*Congenial* 125). Neither of the letters, however, discuss a female Shakespeare, leaving open the possibility that Woolf was inspired in this regard by Schreiner or that both were participating in a shared larger conversation. Thank you to Mia Carter for these references and insights.

42). As Rebekah writes, her children often interrupt her, requiring care. While such interruptions disrupt Rebekah's work, causing her to lose her train of thought, they also inspire her argument that ego-extension, love, and care are more fundamental than the principle of competition and struggle that have dominated theories of the natural world from Hobbes to Spencer. In the following section, I argue that the literary-descriptive form of Schreiner's critique is an essential element of her larger philosophical project, which returns "theory" to the body and the politics of the everyday. While the chapter "Raindrops on the Avenue" contributes little to the novel's plot, through description, it offers an important critique of the suggestion that ontology—theories about the fundamental structure of reality—can ever truly be separated from politics and ethics.

THE ETHICS OF DESCRIPTION

Interspersing Rebekah's diary entries with detailed descriptions of her body, actions, and thoughts, *From Man to Man*, like other New Woman novels, exploits formal elements of the realist novel in order to ask and answer philosophical questions. In her depiction of Rebekah's embodied writing practice—the clasping of her pen, the "ink-spot at the back of her little blue print skirt"—Schreiner cultivates a realist descriptive practices that grounds Rebekah's theories in the body and daily behaviors (187). Rebekah, we are told, "scribbled on, hearing nothing of the rain outside, bending low over her paper with her chin pressed down on her breast" (186). Taking a break from her theorizing, Rebekah begins to sketch human figures:

she sank half back in the chair, still on her knees and, after a time, began slowly drawing with her outstretched hand the pictures of faces down one edge of the page she had written on. They came out slowly, one below the

other, some with sharp features, some with dark beards and curls, some with blunt features, some grotesque and some beautiful. (186)

The characters Rebekah sketches in the margins of her essay echo the descriptive impulse of her work. Reading Schreiner in conversation with George Eliot, whose descriptive ethics I discussed in chapter three, I approach “Raindrops on the Avenue” not only as an important critique of turn-of-the-century scientific discourse, but as a manifesto for a new realism, a realism that would account for the dynamic and interconnected nature of reality. Like Eliot, who would herself argue that all structures are nothing but sets of relations, and whose own descriptions portray the human as a node in a web of interconnected life forms, Schreiner insists that “everywhere the close internettted lines of interaction stretch” (181). I propose that Rebekah’s critique of individualist ontologies is intimately tied to her realist aesthetic: only when one recognizes the webbed nature of reality does *realism*, in Schreiner’s terms, become possible in the first place.

As we saw in Part I, Rebekah’s critique of social Darwinism stems not from its tendency to make social and political claims based on otherwise neutral theories of the natural world, but rather that its observations of the natural world are itself flawed. In overlooking entirely principles of care and connectedness in favor of principles of competition and division, it perpetuates a history of oppression founded on a view of the universe as “a thing of shreds and patches and unconnected parts” (178). This ontology, Rebekah argues—far from neutral, pre-social or pre-ethical—has ethical and political implications that it has carried with it since its inception. Historicizing this view of the universe, Rebekah suggests that this divisive ontology stems from a “Christian conception of the universe” in which God is understood to be the connective force of an otherwise disjointed world (179). In this view, the universe is understood to be a “heap of toys which a child gathers about it on the floor: doll, bugle, brick, book, having no subtle

living connection with each other, being there only because the will of the child has brought them there” (179). In order to explain the organization of such parts, the Christian postulates a “ruling individuality” that gives the disorderly and random order and purpose (179). A particular epistemology is tied to this ontology of deistic transcendence; “truth” here has nothing to do with attempting to discover the connection between the things themselves, but rather is defined as “knowledge of the will of the arbitrary ruling individual” (179).

To position the ruling individual as the fundamental source of meaning, Rebekah argues, however, is to forsake the meaningful interconnectedness of all that is in motion around one. Rebekah rejects such hierarchies of relation, fascinated as she is with relationships obtaining not only between humans and nonhuman things, but between nonhuman things themselves. As she points out, within the Christian view, “truth as it regards the shading of a feather on a bird’s wing, the movement of a planet, the order of social growth, the structure of a human body, can be of no value” (179). Here seekers of knowledge ask not “What is true?” but rather, “What will be the effect of such knowledge or such a statement?” (180). It is for this reason, she explains, that Galileo’s great discovery needed to be suppressed by church authorities. Its effect on dearly held beliefs was too great. Rebekah criticizes the instrumentalization of knowledge in the Christian system, in which the only thing of import is “knowledge of certain facts for a definite purpose”—the purpose of producing meaning, always for man and through God (180).

Happily, however, another outlook has emerged in recent years, Rebekah tells us. Modern thought is marked by a resurgence of the desire to know the intimate structure of reality irrespective of its purpose, use, or effects. In “this new intellectual conception of the nature of the Universe” we find a rekindled “desire for exact knowledge of reality, of things exactly as they were, first and before all things” (177). This is because of the

principle of homology, which, crucial to the emergence of modern science, has allowed things to take on a value greater than themselves. “The prism I hold in my hand” for instance, Rebekah writes,

rightly understood, may throw light on the structure of the furthest sun; the fossil I dug out on the mountain side this morning, rightly studied, may throw light on the structure and meaning of the hand that unearths it. (180)

The physiologist, likewise, carefully examines a tiny drop of blood under his microscope, not because that particular drop is so special, but because it might help to explain the organism of which is it a part. Here “There is no small truth—all truth is great!” (181). Where within the Christian view, God was required in order to make sense of a disenchanted and disconnected world, in this new view no outside organizing force is necessary, as things are understood to be always already in intimate relation. Cultivating her own philosophy of relation, Rebekah works to overturn the notion of a world of discrete and singular objects and replace it with a vision of things in constant connection and relation. As she writes,

For us once again, the Universe has become one, a whole, and it lives in all its parts. Step by step advancing knowledge has shown us the internetting lines of action and reaction which bind together all that we see and are conscious of. (180)

Rebekah’s view of the universe as collection of web of relation allows not only for new scientific epistemologies, but also new aesthetic practices. While an instrumentalized view of the world can only produce art with a “definite purpose,” a theory of the universe as comprised fundamentally of “internetting lines of action and reaction” allows for the emergence of a representational paradigm in which each and every piece of reality merits description (180).

Echoing George Eliot's call in "The Natural History of German Life" for a literary-descriptive practice based on "gradually amassed observations," Schreiner's protagonist, Rebekah, advocates a turn away from morality-driven representations in art toward a thick ethological descriptiveness grounded in practices of close attention and description (127). Like Eliot, whose essay questions the value of idealized portraits of the English peasantry meant to demonstrate a "moral end" (131), Rebekah criticizes art that strays from reality in an attempt to produce sympathy or to provide a moral lesson: "Better the true picture of a beggar in his rags than the willfully false picture of a saint," she writes (198). For Rebekah, the ultimate symbol of morality-driven art is the fig leaf, which covers genitals of the ancient statues in the books she orders from England:

The book of photographs of great statuary, which she had bought at great expense, had so disgusted her with the modern fig-leaves tied on with wire that she had never brought it into her study but had thrown it into a corner of the drawing-room. What would she really feel if she could study plastic art in all its forms, not only Greek, Assyrian, Egyptian, Indian, not through books at secondhand, but actually, as though living, in climates that produced them. (187)

For some, "the human nature falsely painted because it seemed undesirable to paint it as it is, the fig-leaf tied across the loin of the noblest statue, gives no pain and is still art." For Rebekah, however, "the perception of the willful suppression of truth [is] emotionally painful" (186). She longs to understand art in its living context, rather than in a book that decontextualizes its art objects, separating them from their environments and the cultures that gave rise to them.

Rebekah's observations about the limitations of morality-driven art lead her to develop a manifesto for realism as an aesthetic practice attentive to the interconnections

and relations that produce seemingly individualized “things.” As we saw in chapter one, in conversation with Schopenhauer, New Realists and New Woman authors cultivated a dynamic metaphysics that affirmed the all-too-embodied and impulsive model of subjectivity so often attributed to women. In her final novel, Schreiner offers a robust articulation of the philosophical grounds for such a literary project. Realism, within the pages of *From Man to Man*, is much more than an aesthetic practice; it is an embodied and ethically charged mode of ontological inquiry into the relational nature of the universe. That the universe is, in Schreiner’s view, a “pulsating, always interacting whole,” means that realism in her terms is possible, as it is in and through the (ontologically inscribed) principle of homology realism takes on an ethical value (180). In this way, “Raindrops on the Avenue” reflects something of the aims of all of the authors treated in this dissertation to reframe literary description, and representation more broadly, as an affectively charged political act. If the description of reality is not a neutral and transparent practice, but rather its own form of meaning making, then *how* one describes and *what* ontologies one conjures in and through words bears with it not only aesthetic, but also ethical and political significance.

Extending Eliot’s concerns with the affective power of the literary text to account for the role of the body and desire at work in literary knowledge production, Schreiner reconfigures realism as an affectively charged mode of attention. Her portrayal of Rebekah’s intense and embodied desire for knowledge of the world, stresses the pleasure and eroticism at work both in writing and in experiencing the realist art object. Rebekah’s writing is said to stem from “that curious hunger for exact knowledge of things as they are, of naked truth about things small or great, material and also psychic” (177). Likewise, the experience of close and detailed description afford a certain pleasure: “the representation of the smallest or slightest aspect of life, if we are conscious of truth in it,”

she argues, “satisfies an emotional need in us and becomes for us, so far at least, an object of satisfaction” (186). This emphasis on the pleasure of realistic art might seem, at first, to depart from the kind of realism Eliot envisioned.”¹³⁸ Amanda Anderson, for instance, has argued that the sympathetic realism that Eliot cultivates, while critical of some forms of detachment, ultimately institutes an “ideal of critical distance” (*Powers* 4). But Schreiner, not only elaborates upon but draws out the important role of the affect, and, ultimately, the erotic at work in Eliot’s sympathetic ethics.

The figure of the “pulse,” taken up by both Eliot and Schreiner is here a useful point of connection. Neil Hertz has traced the figure of the “pulse” across Eliot’s corpus, glossing it as “a small replicable unit of vitality,” a “sign of life” that animates interaction, change, and movement (13). In *From Man to Man* Schreiner reconfigures Eliot’s “pulse” into a kind of life force drawing together creatures human and nonhuman, material and immaterial. Echoing Eliot’s famous claim in *Middlemarch* that “If we had a keen vision and feeling of all ordinary human life, it would be like hearing the grass grow and the squirrel’s heart beat,” Rebekah writes:

Between spirit that beats within me and body through which it acts,
between mind and matter, between man and beast and plant and earth,
between life that has been the life it is, I am able to see nowhere a sharp
line of severance, but a great, pulsating, always interacting whole. So that
at last it comes to be, that, when I hear my own heartbeat, I actually hear
in it nothing but one throb in that life which has been and is—in which we
live and move and have our being and are constantly sustained. (181)

¹³⁸ As George Levine has argued, “Self-abnegation and the realist openness to the hard unaccommodating actual had gone together in her [Eliot’s] works” (*Dying* 171).

For Schreiner, I propose, the pulse is a record of relation, a mark of intimacy between writers and the world they describe. Thus, through Rebekah, we come to understand the realist novelist not as a distanced and objective observer but rather as an intimately involved participant in the world whose desire drives her descriptions.

Schreiner never met Eliot (Eliot died the year before Schreiner arrived in England), but she seems to have felt a physical, if not erotic, connection to her through her writing. After reading *Romola* for the first time, Schreiner observed, “George Eliot seems to live again in it, and one finds her grand old heart beating though it” (“To Isaline Philpot”). Returning to the language of the heartbeat, Schreiner characterizes reading itself as a form of embodied connection. In her letters, Schreiner expresses her desire to physically encounter Eliot, to greet her with the intimacy of a kiss: “I wish George Eliot was alive,” she wrote in 1883, “I would like ^so^ to ask her to let me kiss her” (“To Philip Kent”). Likewise, in *From Man to Man* Rebekah’s relationship to the authors of the books she cherishes is shot through with desire. Her books

seemed to love her. Behind each was hidden the mind of some human creature which at some time had touched her own; they were all the intellectual intercourse she had ever known. Not one was there because it was a rare or old copy, or had an expensive binding; each one was there because at some time she had lived close to it and it had penetrated her.
(175)

We might here read Rebekah similarly to the way that David Kurnick has read Eliot’s Dorothea—as an “erotically impelled researcher” whose “pursuit of insight into the structure of reality” is informed both by a distanced criticality and an immersive desire (597). As Kurnick argues, novel reading in *Middlemarch* is itself a path to knowledge in the way that it allows readers not only to observe reality from a distance, but to immerse

themselves in it. Schreiner seems to have picked up on Eliot's interest in literature as a space of affective possibility, and she borrows her figure of the "pulse" in order to signal that surge of feeling.

In letters to her close friend, the mathematician Karl Pearson, Schreiner reveals her concern with the way that thought itself arises out of the fictions or vibrations of feeling.¹³⁹ In one such letter, she contests Pearson's view that "the senses of taste & touch seem to have no intellectual side," arguing that taste and touch, among other senses, are *the very basis of knowledge*. As she put it, "Touch, (the sense of pressure) most present in the hands & lips &c but more or less existing in ... all tissues) is the root of almost all our intellectual knowledge." Where Pearson contends that taste and touch can never "become aesthetic," Schreiner turns to both human and nonhuman animals in order to counter his claim: "the cat," she points out, "uses her sense aesthetically when she rubbs her face against velvet, & a dog when he comes & stands besides you & looks up into your face that you my touch him on the head" ("To Karl Pearson" 3 July 1886). In another letter she discusses the "touch of brain on brain" that characterizes intense intellectual exchange between humans (qtd. in Burdett 90).

Schreiner works to cultivate this kind of "intellectualized touch" throughout her writing, which mixes detailed and sensual descriptions with philosophical theorizing. In so doing, she performs the realist aesthetic that Rebekah calls for when she argues that, while the "true reproduction of a sunrise or a narrative that shows the working of a lofty spirit" are certainly "delightful," "art which reproduces the texture of a lady's dress or paints the picture of a small soul" produces more differentiated thought-emotions. Echoing Rebekah, Schreiner will thus describe the texture of her protagonist's dress, and

¹³⁹ For more on "Schreiner's fundamental conviction that emotion or feeling cannot be kept separate, or expelled from, the sphere of intellect and reason" see Burdett (90).

she will tell the story of a “small” rather than a “lofty soul” (186). In this way, Schreiner’s novel can also be seen to answer Eliot’s call in the “Prelude” to *Middlemarch* to tell the story of “Therasas” who never achieve the iconic status of their saintly namesake, women, Eliot writes, whose “loving heart-beats and sobs after an unattained goodness tremble off and are dispersed among hindrances, instead of centring in some long-recognizable deed” (4).¹⁴⁰ The ethics of description, as cultivated by both Eliot and Schreiner, thus highlights the ethical import of representing those whose effect on the world is not monumental, but merely “diffusive,” to quote Eliot’s description of Dorothea in her novel’s final lines (785). Such an ethics, as Schreiner’s chapter makes clear, emerges from a conviction that the small, the slight, and the seemingly insignificant are themselves significant and worth describing. This aesthetic conviction, moreover, is tied to an ontology, a belief that the universe is not a collection of static and unrelated parts, but rather “a pulsating, always interacting whole.” In the following section, I read Schreiner in conversation with the contemporary feminist philosopher Karen Barad in order to draw out the implications of her relational thought for more recent debates about the relationship between matter and meaning. Is matter passively inscribed with (ethical, political or aesthetic) meaning, or are matter and meaning deeply intertwined? Continuing to interrogate Schreiner’s figure of the “pulse,” I show how Schreiner’s philosophy of relation draws from turn-of-the-century physics and philosophy in order to make a claim Barad does not: that thinking with *forces* instead of *things* or *particles* allows one to see the fundamentally relational, and thus ethical nature of the universe itself.

¹⁴⁰ Compare here also the narrator of *Adam Bede*’s call a turn from descriptions of “cloud-borne angels, from prophets, sibyls and heroic warriors, to an old woman bending over her flower-pot, or eating her solitary dinner” (179).

THE ETHICS OF FORCE

As Rebekah argues, the seemingly discrete parts of the universe are not divided by a void, Rebekah argues, but rather connected:

Between the furthest star and the planet earth we live on, between the most distant planet and the ground we tread on, between man, plant, bird, beast and clod of earth, everywhere the close internetted lines of interaction stretch; nowhere are we able to draw a sharp dividing line, nowhere find an isolated existence. (181)

One of Schreiner's favorite words throughout the piece, the verb "to internet" (inter-*prefix* + net *v.*), used in both of the above passages, captures the sense of active interconnectivity she understands to exist between all things. She takes the word from the context of physics, in which recent findings had shown that space itself was not an empty vacuum filled with solid bodies, but rather itself full of particles moving between all things.

The first recorded usage of the word "internet" appears in 1883 in a letter to the editor of the journal *Nature* by the physicist A. S. Herschel concerning an essay published in the same journal one month earlier by Charles Morris entitled "The Matter of Space" ("Internet, V"). In "The Matter of Space" Morris contests the theory that space was either ether or a vacuum, proposing that space itself—like matter—was comprised of "minute particles, moving with intense speed" (349). His findings show that "matter is present everywhere throughout the universe, as well in interstitial space as in the bodies of the spheres" (349). Writing in support of Morris' article, Herschel's letter recounts his awe at the "marvelous maze of internetted motions" Morris so "correctly and truthfully described" (458). Schreiner "internetting lines of action and reaction" echo Herschel's "marvelous maze of internetted motions." Just like these physicists, Rebekah suggests

that the so-called “space” between things is illusory; “nowhere are we able to draw a sharp dividing line, nowhere find an isolated existence.” For Schreiner, as becomes clearer throughout the piece, matter consists in a kind of creative activity bringing things it comprises into relation. Such active interconnectivity renders every tiny part of the world significant for its potential to affect everything else.

During the years Schreiner was composing *From Man to Man*, the raw materialism of thinkers like Morris and Herschel was stirring major controversy among religious thinkers. The physicist John Tyndall articulated one of the most controversial expressions of the materialist position in his 1874 address to the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Belfast. Tyndall’s “Belfast Address” radically undermined Christian metaphysics by implying that no God was necessary to explain the dynamic interactions of the universe. Citing Greek atomists like Epicurus and Democritus, alongside nineteenth-century scientists like Spencer, Darwin, and Haeckel, in his speech Tyndall constructs a history of materialism from ancient Greek atomism to contemporary physics and biology. Tyndall argues that “the science of ancient Greece had already cleared the world of the fantastic images of divinities operating capriciously through natural phenomena” (11). After the long detour that was Christian theology, contemporary physics and biology were poised to validate and extend these ancient philosophical theories of matter.

Rebekah’s essay, too, is predicated on a fundamental connection between Victorian and ancient Greek thinkers, suggesting that she may have encountered Tyndall’s speech as she began to compose *From Man to Man* in the 1870s. Tyndall begins his address by declaring that “An impulse inherent in primeval man turned his thoughts and questionings betimes towards the sources of natural phenomena. The same impulse, inherited and intensified, is the spur of scientific action to-day” (1). Similarly,

Rebekah begins her writings with the suggestion that an ancient curiosity about the natural world has re-infused scientific thinking at present. As Rebekah puts it, in order “to find any true likeness to the modern feeling” we need to “go back to the life and thought of classical days, especially to the life and thought of Greece in the fourth century before Christ” (177). Three months after Tyndall delivered his speech at Belfast, extensive extracts of it were published in the November 1874 issue of the South African newspaper the *Cape Monthly*. The address was also widely available in print in England after Schreiner arrived in London in 1881.

Tyndall’s “Belfast Address” stirred serious controversy amongst religious thinkers who disapproved of its atheistic vision. In his speech Tyndall recounts his experience with one such person: “‘Did I not believe,’ said a great man to me once, ‘that an Intelligence is at the heart of things, my life on earth would be intolerable’” (7). But although for such persons the world cleared of divinity was equivalent to a world devoid of meaning and conscious intent, Tyndall goes on to argue that materialism need not lead us to this conclusion. Such disenchantment relies on one’s conception of matter. If matter is perceived as passive and mechanistic, then God is required in order to enliven it and give it meaning. However, if we understand the “agent” of Nature to be the “active and mobile part of the material itself,” then the universe retains a kind of activity and unpredictability (25). Following Lucretius, Tyndall implies that the random swerving of particles actually make free will, chance, and indeterminacy possible. Using ancient Greek materialists to demonstrate to his audience “the error ... in ascribing fixity to that which is fluent,” moreover, Tyndall reveals what he calls the “structural power of matter” (7, 56).

Rebekah’s poetic contention that “internetting lines of action and reaction ... bind together all that we see and are conscious of” (180) reflects Tyndall’s scientific portrait of

“predetermined internal relations ... independent of the experiences of the individual” (52). In agreement that individual objects apparent to the human eye are interconnected in sometimes indiscernible ways, Tyndall and Schreiner oppose the position that relations exist only in a mind, a thesis famously defended at the turn of the twentieth century by the philosopher F.H. Bradley. In *Appearance and Reality* (1893), Bradley argued that the notion of two things being related generated an infinite regress, a problem that requires one to abandon the thesis that relations are mind-independent. Schreiner’s insistence that no “ruling individuality” is necessary in order to see that “internetting lines of action and reaction ... bind together all that we see and are conscious of,” suggests that if she did know of Bradley’s work, she would have found his idealism troubling. Instead, I want to suggest, Rebekah’s position on relations looks forward to the “agential realism” of the twenty-first century feminist theorist, Karen Barad, who turns to the physicist Niels Bohr to develop the philosophical thesis that “relata do not preexist relations” (*Meeting* 140).

While Barad, whose unique blend of deconstructive philosophy and quantum theory reacts against the linguistic turn of the twentieth century, remains distant from Schreiner both historically and theoretically, her commitment to theorizing relationality in conversation with findings in physics renders her a fellow traveler in the quest to draw together disparate strands of knowledge—feminist theory, physics, and philosophy—together with the aim of constructing a relational ontology she terms “agential realism.” As with Schreiner, for Barad, matter is not a thing, but rather *a doing, an acting*. And yet, for Barad, there are no “agents” as such; as she argues, “relata” (i.e. individual things or objects) cannot be said to ontologically “preexist” their “relations” (that which connects or brings them together).¹⁴¹ All things are produced in and through relations, Barad

¹⁴¹ Barad writes that she tries “to stay away from using the term ‘agent,’ or even ‘actant,’ because these terms work against the relational ontology [she is] proposing.” This is because, as she explains, “agency for me is not something that someone or something has to varying degrees, since I am trying to displace the

argues, drawing on Bohr's two-slit interference experiment to argue that entities are always entangled in a nexus of matter and meaning. Whether an atom appears as a particle or a wave when it moves through a two-slit apparatus, Bohr's experiment demonstrates, depends on how it is measured. This is different than Heisenberg's "Uncertainty Principle" which suggests that the reason why it changes from a wave pattern to a particle pattern is because the observer disturbs the particle. The problem for Bohr is not uncertainty, but rather indeterminacy: the very ontology of the particle is produced in and through the apparatus itself.

For Schreiner, likewise, matter consists in a kind of creative activity producing "things" in and through "relations." Such active interconnectivity renders every tiny part of the world both ethically and aesthetically significant for its potential to affect everything else. While within the old view, again, "truth, as it regards the shading of a feather on a bird's wing, the movement of a planet, the order of social growth, the structure of a human body, can be of no value," in this new view, all truths are great, as a result of their connection to the universe as a whole (179). Like Barad, who advocates for an ethico-onto-epistemology that would recognize the entanglement of matter and meaning, moreover, Schreiner develops a metaphysics with clear ethical and epistemological stakes. As Barad writes,

questions of ethics and of justice are always already threaded through the very fabric of the world. They are not an additional concern that gets added on or placed in our field of vision now and again by particular kinds

very notion of independently existing individuals. This is not, however, to deny agency in its importance, but on the contrary, to rework the notion of agency in ways that are appropriate to relational ontologies. Agency is not held, it is not a property of persons or things; rather, agency is an enactment, a matter of possibilities for reconfiguring entanglements. So agency is not about choice in any liberal humanist sense; rather, it is about the possibilities and accountability entailed in reconfiguring material-discursive apparatuses of bodily production, including the boundary articulations and exclusions that are marked by those practices" ("Interview" 54).

of concern... Matters of fact, matters of concern, and matters of care are shot through with one another. Or to put it in yet another way: matter and meaning cannot be severed. ("Interview" 69)

Prefiguring Barad's contention that "Epistemology, ontology, and ethics are inseparable," Schreiner suggests that our ontologies are not free from their epistemological and ethical implications ("Interview" 69). Reading Schreiner alongside Barad allows us to see how her philosophy of relation is not simply an attempt to conceive of a metaphysics that would justify her feminist ethics of care, but also an effort to account for how it is that epistemology, ontology, and ethics are themselves intertwined. Schreiner's writing cycles constantly from metaphysical issues to political questions, to aesthetics and then back to ontology again. Such register-shifts, I believe, are less a confused attempt to provide a "theory of everything" than a forward-looking attempt to cultivate an agential realism like that of Barad's in which individuals do not preexist as such, but materialize through intra-action.

While Rebekah finds support for her thesis in the work of her contemporaries like Tyndall and others, subtle differences in her language signal that physicists have not yet quite gone far enough in their speculations. In Tyndall's atomistic vision the world is comprised of particles that "produce by their subsequent inter-action all the phenomena of the material world" (26). Rebekah, however, significantly avoids mention of words denoting discrete units such as "particles," "atoms" and "molecules," preferring instead a smoother vocabulary of "forces," "pulses" and "lines." This difference in vocabulary is striking given how closely Schreiner's chapter follows the themes and ideas of Tyndall's speech. While she echoes many of his sentiments by repeating choice phrases from his speech, she tends to replace references to closed, individual units with more open and connective notions of flows and paths. Where Tyndall describes "molecules" that

“remain unbroken and unworn” throughout history as “the foundation stones of the material universe” (26), for instance, Rebekah refers instead to “long unbroken lines of connection” between herself and life three million years ago (180). As she writes,

between the life that moved in the creature that ploughed in the mud of the lake-shores three million years ago and the life which beats in my brain and moves in my eyes here in the sunshine today, I can see long unbroken lines of connection. (180)

In Tyndall’s speech, what remains “unbroken” are molecules, as the analogy between molecules and “foundation stones” suggests. For Schreiner, however, what is durable are not such forms themselves, but rather the “lines of connection” between them. We might attribute such differences in vocabulary to Schreiner’s desire to avoid scientific terminology in favor of more poetic terms. However, Rebekah’s cosmology is however more than a literary rendition of Tyndall’s speech. Rather, it is a *literary intervention* into the debates in physics and philosophy as to whether matter is best understood in terms of discrete entities such as atoms or rather fields of force and energy.

Like Tyndall in his famous “Belfast Address,” in “Raindrops on the Avenue” Schreiner works to replace the Christian’s theory of a divine “Intelligence ... at the heart of things” with a new materialist vision (Tyndall 7). Where the physicist’s atomic vision centers upon the random motions of *particles*, however, Schreiner’s metaphysics, slightly differently, centers upon a “stretching out, uniting creative *force*” (213, emphasis mine). Schreiner’s aversion to the atomic theory of matter might be explained by her distaste for metaphysical theories that reduce the universe to “a thing of shreds and patches and unconnected parts” (179). While Schreiner directs her critique at Christian metaphysics, which, as she argues, cannot think relation without positing an extrinsic form of divine connectivity, her critique of the theory of the universe as comprised of “unconnected

parts” also applies to atomism. As Karl Marx had noted in his doctoral dissertation from 1844, “die Atome sind *sich selbst ihr einziges Objekt*, [sie] können sich nur auf sich beziehen” (“atoms are *their own singular objects and can relate only to themselves*”) (*Differenz*, my translation). Given Schreiner’s investment in connection and relation, it is easy to understand why she might avoid the theory of matter as comprised of discrete, self-sufficient indivisible units bouncing off one another in the void. Her pulsating metaphysics, I propose, privileges relational forces over individualized things.

Schreiner’s literary transformation of Tyndall’s atomistic framework into a dynamistic one thus places her in a lineage of philosophers, from Spinoza and Schopenhauer to Nietzsche and Deleuze, for whom relationality can be understood as primacy of force, and thus for whom atomism is always a mask for dynamism. In *Nietzsche and Philosophy* (1962), Deleuze argues that one of Nietzsche’s most important teachings consists in his insistence that “only force can be related to another force” (6). As Deleuze explains, “atomism attempts to impart to matter an essential plurality and distance which in fact belong only to force” (6). In other words, to think of the world as a collection of discrete units is to ignore the lines of force that comprise and connect so-called “individual” entities. Connections, interactions, and movement as such would not be possible without force. As Deleuze summarizes, “The notion of atom cannot itself contain the difference necessary for the affirmation of such a relation, difference in and according to essence. This atomism would be a mask for incipient dynamism” (7).

The theory that atomism is a mask for an incipient dynamism takes its modern form in the philosophy of Schopenhauer, which, as was saw in chapter one, is fundamentally opposed to “the view that the world’s ultimate constituents are tiny chunks of matter in terms of whose behaviour everything else is to be explained” (Young 59). Ridiculing attempts to render concrete and thing-like that which is “pure causality,”

Schopenhauer referred to atomism as a “revolting absurdity” (WR II: 302, 305). As Schopenhauer argues in *The World as Will*, although matter exhibits itself as a body, he writes, “its whole essence consists in acting” (“das ganze Wesen der Materie besteht im Wirken”) (WR II 305). As Young suggests, we might read Schopenhauer’s critique of atomism as an attempt to “dematerialise or desubstantialise matter” (59):

Opposing the ‘chunky’ view, Schopenhauer understands good science to hold that the ultimate constituents of matter are extensionless centers of pure ‘causality’, in other words of force. The natural world is nothing but space filled with (as modern science calls them) force fields. These fields of force, as Schopenhauer puts it, ‘objectivity’ themselves—are experienced by us—as perceptible bodies, yet outside of the human mind such bodies have no existence. When we say that a body is ‘hard heavy, fluid, green, alkaline, organic and so on’, we are merely reporting the ‘action or effect’ of force fields on the human mind. (59)

Even before field theorists had empirically shown that objects were not bounded, contained units, that is, but rather concatenations of force, Schopenhauer had argued that matter and energy are two sides of the same coin. As Schopenhauer puts it, “every object as thing-in-itself is will, and as a phenomenon is matter” (WR II: 307). As Bryan Magee explains, for Schopenhauer, “it is just the case that every material object is material object if regarded in a certain way that looked at in another way it is blind force; and that the two are one and the same thing” (145).

As I argued in chapter one, Schopenhauer’s writings on sex and love were especially amenable to novelistic thinking because they were widely distributed in English, and because they focused on everyday life as well as on high-philosophical issues. Schreiner likewise turns to Schopenhauer at her more philosophical moments,

combining his insights into the fundamentally dynamic nature of the universe with recent findings in physics. We know that late-century English readers like Schreiner looked to Schopenhauer in order to question the theory that matter was comprised of discrete, solid bodies, because we have evidence like an 1885 lecture citing Schopenhauer to such ends given by Schreiner's close friend, Karl Pearson, mathematician and founder of the Men and Women's Club. Deep similarities between Pearson's lecture "Matter and Soul" and Schreiner's "Raindrops on the Avenue" suggest that this chapter may have been partly inspired by Pearson's talk. Pearson and Schreiner may have developed their views about Schopenhauer together, either at the Men and Women's Club or outside of it. Schreiner began reading Schopenhauer as early as March 1885, nine months before Pearson gave his lecture on Schopenhauer at the Sunday Society at St. George's Hall, London, in December 1885.¹⁴²

In his lecture Pearson turns to Schopenhauer to argue that the very perceptibility of matter depends on the forces that enliven it.¹⁴³ Closely echoing the sentiment of Tyndall's speech ten years earlier, Pearson makes the case that materialism need not render the world spiritless if we understand matter to be a dynamic force. Calling into question oppositions between spirit and matter, the organic and inorganic, and the ideal and material, Pearson attacks the "dogma," as he calls it, that "matter is something everywhere tangible, something hard, impenetrable" (23). Instead, he proposes, we might follow Schopenhauer in understanding that "the basis of the universe, the reality popularly termed matter, is *will*" (32).

¹⁴² Pearson delivered the talk on 6 December 1885 (the same year that Schreiner joined the Men and Women's Club) and it was published in 1886 as a pamphlet. Pearson and Schreiner developed an intense relationship and were very close until 1886, when their friendship suffered a break after members of the club informed Pearson that Schreiner was "in love" with him, which she denied. They corresponded intermittently until 1889 and she wrote him once in 1890 to congratulate him on his marriage to Maria Sharpe, another central member of the club.

¹⁴³ Published in 1888 as part of *The Ethic of Freethought and Other Essays*.

Pearson and Schreiner were at their closest at the time Pearson gave his talk “Matter and Soul” in December 1885. Letters between the two show that Pearson had invited Schreiner to attend the lecture, sending her a ticket, but she did not attend, explaining herself with the excuse, “my mind was in such a wild maze I shouldn’t have gained much.” She did, however, read the published version in 1886 and found it quite exciting. As she wrote Pearson in August 1886, just a few months before their friendship would begin to suffer from the social pressures of the Club, “I think ‘Matter & Soul’ the most perfect thing you have written, the thing I read with small internal grunts of approval, ‘that’s right! That’s just as it ought to be!’ sort of feeling” (“To Karl Pearson” 7 Aug 1886). The following year, Schreiner would leave London after a “blow-up” in which various members of the club accused her of being “in love” with Pearson (Dampier 47). But even in the years following her break with Pearson in late 1886, his work as well as that of Schopenhauer remained on her mind as she worked to complete *From Man to Man*. In 1888 Schreiner wrote to Ellis concerning Pearson, Schopenhauer, and her troubles composing *From Man to Man*. Before moving on to discuss Schopenhauer, the negative effects of celibacy on writing, and her difficulty with creating petty female characters, her letter to Ellis on 27 January 1888 defends Pearson’s *The Ethic of Freethought* (1888), a collection of essays in which “Matter and Soul” had recently been reprinted. Calling it a “very brave thing” to have published in “Pearson’s position,” Schreiner claims that “Anything approaching to that has never been published in England before by a professor in a college or university” (“To Havelock Ellis” 27 Jan 1888).

In “Matter and Soul” Pearson proposes the fundamental unity of the energy that causes a cell to divide, an atom to vibrate, and a human to act. “The great fact of all physical experience,” he argues, is that “bodies are able to change each other’s motions”

(25). “Is there any other phenomenon of which we are conscious that at all resembles this apparently spontaneous change of motion?” he asks (32).

There is one which bears considerable resemblance to it. I raise my hand, the change of motion appears to you spontaneous; the how of it might be explained by a series of nerve-excitements and muscular motions, but the why of it, the ultimate cause, you might possibly attribute to something you termed my will. The will is something which at least appears capable of changing motion. But something moving is capable of changing the motion of something else. It is not a far step to suggest from analogy that the something moving, namely matter, may be will. (32)

As we saw in chapter one, Schopenhauer reasons that the “inside access” one has to one’s own body allows one to understand the nature of *all objects* as motivated by Will. He argues that forces that cause a rock to fall or a chemical reaction to occur are metaphysically identical to human will—the difference being merely that the former are experienced by the human from the “outside” and the latter from the “inside.” Closely following Schopenhauer’s line of reasoning, Pearson argues that the force or motion makes the perception of matter as such possible. As he writes, “if everything in the universe were brought to rest, the universe would cease to be perceptible, or for all human purposes we may say it would cease to be” (25). That is, “matter and force are two entities always occurring together, by means of which we can explain the whole working of the universe” (24). As he argues, materialism need not relegate us to a world of lifeless predictability if unpredictable and lively forces lie at the heart of matter itself.

From Man to Man is a typical New Women novel in that it provides a venue for serious philosophical thinking about the body, agency, and sexuality. And like many other novels from that movement, it takes inspiration, however surprisingly, from the

thought of Arthur Schopenhauer. Schopenhauer's theory of the world as Will echoes in Rebekah's philosophizing about the unity and interconnectedness of life. This framework serves as the basis for her feminist ethics of care and for her critique of social Darwinism and its principle of competition. "I have been looking at that life of Schopenhauer to-day," Schreiner wrote to Ellis, in 1886.

If I had ever read him, or even knew before I came to England that such a man existed, one would say I had copied whole ideas in the African Farm and From Man to Man from him. ...There's something so beautiful in coming on one's very own most inmost thoughts in another. In one way it's one of the greatest pleasures one has. That Life by Miss Zimmern is very well written.... The women's rights women are going mad, it seems to me. The latest idea is to set up a women's parliament to legislate for women and children! ("To Havelock Ellis" 2 March 1885)

Schreiner's quick change of topics in her letter to Ellis from admiration for Schopenhauer to a frustration with the separatist leanings of the women's rights movement (the ellipsis here is hers, not mine) might at first seem like a *non-sequitur*. But I read this ellipsis less as a trailing off than a synapse fire, a bridge linking metaphysics to ethics that one often crosses while reading Schreiner's fiction. For Schreiner, literature was a place where philosophical questions about the structure of the universe played out in specific bodies, voices, and actions. Her novels move seamlessly from high philosophical issues to everyday life, from metaphysics to ethics and back again.

Close attention to the *political history* of ontology is crucial as we decide whether and how to engage, resist, and/or move with the ontological turn of more recent philosophy. Where various philosophers would argue that ontology is by definition *autonomous from* or *more basic than* problems of gender, sexuality, colonialism, race,

neoliberalism, capitalism and anything else that might pertain to “culture,” writers like Schreiner demonstrate the difficulty of severing ontological inquiry from social and political questions.¹⁴⁴ Theorizing rather than resisting the entanglement of nature and culture, matter and meaning, New Woman writers looked to the natural world in order to explain social and political life. For Schreiner, in particular, nature was not a unified and monolithic set of laws infused with social and political meaning when applied to culture. It was rather itself a set of dynamic forces whose constant *bringing-into-relation* does not merely *allow for*, but ultimately *demand*s ethical and political thought.

¹⁴⁴ Consider the case of speculative realists and object-orientated ontologists like Levi Bryant and Graham Harman. Claiming that ontology is presocial and prepolitical, Bryant writes that “it is striking that debates surrounding [speculative realism and object-oriented ontology] have been focused on questions of the social and political” “given that SR, in the hands of its original four founders has been a rather apolitical set of philosophical concerns focused on questions of the being of the real, the nature of materiality, and questions of epistemology” (15). Harman has even more explicitly argued that metaphysics and politics live in separate realms and that “philosophy should not be the handmaid of anything else” (Harman). Where Bryant and Harman liberate philosophy from politics, however, Schreiner hopes for more politically aware ontological thinkers.

“But now I must recall what Mr. Arnold Bennett says. He says that it is only if the characters are real that the novel has any chance of surviving. Otherwise, die it must. But, I ask myself, what is reality? And who are the judges of reality?”

- Virginia Woolf, “Mr. Bennett and Mrs. Brown” (10)

CODA: Rethinking Realism

When the realist novel emerged in the nineteenth century, it proposed to describe the world in more detail, more comprehensively, or more accurately than any genre before it. When I began graduate school in the early 2000s, I learned to be suspicious of this descriptive project. I absorbed critiques of realism’s tendency to level and flatten the human social world (Lukács), to immobilize and objectify women (Schor), and to “effect” a sense of reality despite its ambitions to “describe” it (Barthes), and I wrote papers insisting that realism merely re-instantiated bourgeois notions of desire and relationality under the guise of “the real.” My approach was implicitly shaped by a guiding assumption of late twentieth-century theory: that any positive account of “reality”—however tenuous or modest—was necessarily misguided in its attempt to unify and naturalize what ultimately consisted in a set of subjective and culture-laden perspectives.

My thinking about realism began to change, however, as a shifting theoretical landscape opened up new ways of understanding two of realism’s key terms: reality and description. When I began this project in 2010, the turn away from critique inaugurated by theorists like Bruno Latour had begun to lift the prohibition on positive accounts of how reality might be structured, and a host of “new” realisms and materialisms had emerged to actively theorize the workings of matter, nature, and the real. Latour’s candid

assertion at the beginning of *Pandora's Hope* (1999) that not only did he “believe in reality” but he found the suggestion that reality was “something people have to believe in” absurd set the tone for a generation of scholars much more comfortable speculating about the nature of “reality” than those before them (1).¹⁴⁵ The “speculative turn”—the name some have given to the renewed ambition of various theorists to understand “what the real world is really like,” as Latour puts it in *Reassembling the Social* (2005)—has formed the backdrop of this dissertation in the way that it has encouraged me to consider the extent to which realism is an aesthetic mode capable not merely of enforcing particular, ideologically charged realities, but also of *rethinking reality itself* as a set of dynamic forces and shifting meanings (117). Indeed, this is precisely what realism became in the hands of women and feminist authors of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—writers deeply engaged with the scientific and philosophical thought of their time, or so I have argued. To describe reality, for Eliot, Hardy, and Schreiner, was not so much an attempt to provide an objective or birds-eye view of the world, but rather to cultivate a form of ontological inquiry on par with that of philosophy and science—to question the assumptions of these discourses, but also to *think with* them, to appropriate their insights to literary ends.

The implications of this largely nineteenth-century endeavor are salient today because of the work of a host of contemporary thinkers invested in wresting ontological inquiry from the essentialism and determinism that long characterized it. One crucial moment in this critical history can be found in Eve Sedgwick and Adam Frank’s 1994

¹⁴⁵ From the Latour-inspired coterie of thinkers of writing under the moniker “speculative realism” to “feminist materialists” like Elizabeth Grosz calling for more ambitious work concerning “the dynamic force of the real itself and how the real enables representation” (Kontturi, Tiainen, and Grosz 247), critical theorists and philosophers of the early twenty-first century have turned from questions of language and discourse to focus instead upon questions of the real, the material, and the biological.

essay “Shame in the Cybernetic Fold,” which questioned the “routinized dismissal” of the biological, the innate, and the natural at work in contemporary theory (521). As Sedgwick and Frank argued with reference to the work of the twentieth-century American psychologist Silvan Tomkins, to posit a finite number of biologically grounded values—in the case of Tomkins, just eight (infinitely gradated) affects—need not prevent one from “doing justice to difference (individual, historical, and cross-cultural), to contingency, to performative force, and to the possibility of change” (496). Indeed, the exploration of the *finite limits* of life, materiality, emotion and embodiment (in addition to their *infinite potentialities*) might actually allow one to forward “a political vision of difference that might resist both binary homogenization and infinitizing trivialization” (512). What role might literature play in forwarding such differentiated visions? Are literature’s speculations contained to the realm of the (infinitely) socially constructible or can it too provide insights into “what the real world is really like”?

Science studies scholars like Latour have gone some way in rethinking the binarization of the humanities (marked since sciences wars by a postmodernist skepticism about reality) and the sciences (for whom scientific knowledge is supposedly understood to be objective and real). Arguing that the sciences indeed “speak of the world,” though not perhaps way one might assume, in his essay “Circulating Reference” (1999) Latour developed a theory of scientific reference as a series of mediatory chains, retraceable forward and backward through a series of linguistic and material transformations. Critical of the assumption that science attempts a form of mimesis, a pointing across the gap between words and the world, Latour proposed that, to the contrary, the sciences sacrifice resemblance entirely, opting instead for the replacement of things with words, numbers, and pictures—a process of transubstantiation in which elements are lost, but also

renewed. At the end of his essay, Latour frames the so-called problem of the “gap” between words and the world as a long held confusion about science and realist art:

This whole tired question of the correspondence between words and the world stems from a simple confusion between epistemology and the history of art. We have taken science for realist painting, imagining that it made an exact copy of the world. The sciences do something else entirely—paintings too for that matter. (*Pandora's* 78-9)

What does realist art do “too for that matter”? The sciences, Latour argues, “link us to a transformed, constructed world” through a “series of uniformly discontinuous transformations” (79). But Latour does not develop his point about realism further, leaving the reader to wonder whether realist art too is capable of this transformatory work, whether realism transforms the world into paint or text or whether it does “something else entirely.”

This project has not been so ambitious as to attempt to offer a new theory of realism. In exploring how realism transformed across the late nineteenth and early twentieth century in England, however, I have shown how realism shifted from an aesthetic mode aimed at producing life-like descriptions of everyday experience into a form of literary ontology concerned with making observations about the physical and metaphysical nature of reality. Eliot. Hardy. Schreiner. I returned to these writers over and over again because they saw in realism a potential for a kind of conceptual work that transcended the generic and disciplinary bounds of “literature,” “science,” and “philosophy.” From Eliot’s late work to the New Woman novel in the 1880s and 90s we discover the emergence of an intercontinental discourse according to which character emerged relationally between lively and reactive bodies. Descriptions of the human as a material creature motivated by impulse and drive, I believe, were not merely a passive

reflection of an increasingly materialistic scientific discourse. Rather, through description, as I have been arguing, the novel actively intervened in scientific and philosophical debates about what it meant to be an embodied subject, how qualities in organisms emerge and develop, and the relationship between nature and culture. It came to understand its project in terms of the description of dynamic material systems—bodies, structures, and worlds undergoing change and moving according to non-developmental or non-linear tempos. I am talking here less about what feels to me like the perpetual smoothness of a Deleuzian “flow,” than about how, through the literary figure of character, realist authors turned to description and narration to explore how entities differentiate themselves—as individuals or as types—as well as, more basically, how things begin to develop and move in specific, though not necessarily predetermined, directions. What are the forces that ignite a desire, inaugurate a movement and how does language adapt to capture, convey, or adorn this dynamic motion?

This dissertation reaches its historical limit in the 1920s with the posthumous publication of Olive Schreiner’s *From Man to Man* (1926). One thing I have not yet been able to adequately explore, though I hope to in future iterations of the project, are the complexities of the relationship between these late realist authors and their modernist contemporaries. Toril Moi has argued that realism “is neither modernism’s predecessor nor its negative opposite” (67). Likewise, Michael Levenson has suggested that modernism itself begins to appear “within the conventions of an aesthetic realism that needs to be preserved in any full account of the period” (20). Blurring the boundaries between realism and modernism, realists like Schreiner explored the materiality and temporality of human existence in ways that prefigured modernist writers like Virginia Woolf. In the preface to the second edition of *The Story of An African Farm*, Schreiner explains how, rather than funneling characters into plots with clear beginnings, middle,

and ends, her novel will record the random and unpredictable micromovements that comprise human experience. “Human life,” she writes, “may be painted according to two methods.”

There is the stage method. According to that each character is duly marshalled at first, and ticketed; we know with an immutable certainty that at the right crises each one will reappear and act his part, and, when the curtain falls, all will stand before it bowing. There is a sense of satisfaction in this, and of completeness. But there is another method—the method of the life we all lead. Here nothing can be prophesied. There is a strange coming and going of feet. Men appear, act and re-act upon each other, and pass away. When the crisis comes the man who would fit it does not return. When the curtain falls no one is ready. When the footlights are brightest they are blown out; and what the name of the play is no one knows. (xxxix)

The arc of a carefully crafted plot, Schreiner implies in her preface—while it might provide the reader with a sense of completeness—smooths over the unevenness and dynamism of everyday experience, what in *From Man to Man* she calls the “internetting lines of action and reaction.” Schreiner’s characters will thus not follow a prepared script, she suggests, but will rather “act and re-act up on each other” in a novel that aims to reveal the mutability of life.

Where others have emphasized modernism’s breaks from Victorian convention an expanded version of this project might explore how the embodied perspectives found in late Victorian genres like the New Woman novel and the New Realism prefigured and informed modernist innovations in character as a material and often exteriorized phenomenon. It thus has the potential to complicate the binary model of realism vs.

experimentation in which nineteenth-century realism is thought to give way to new and distinct spaces of modernist art making. Schreiner's preface theorizes something like the "fluctuating spontaneity" this dissertation discovers in the representation of character in the late nineteenth century. But it also looks forward to the experiments of modernist writers with the representation of subjectivity. Consider, in closing, Virginia Woolf's essay, "Modern Fiction" (1925) published some forty years after Schreiner's preface.¹⁴⁶ As Woolf writes,

Let us record the atoms fall upon the mind in the order in which they fall, let us trace the pattern, however, disconnected and incoherent in appearance, which each sight or incident scores upon the consciousness. Let us not take for granted that life exists more fully in what is commonly thought big, than what is commonly thought small. (161)¹⁴⁷

Schreiner's "coming and going of feet," her actions and reactions—which in *From Man to Man*, one will remember, emerge in explicit reference to the debates about atomism—these things are echoed here in Woolf's falling atoms. Both writers express an interest in recording the minute and nonlinear motions, the "incoherent" and nonlinear, the small and seemingly disconnected or inconsequential, rather than the epic and monumental. Woolf of course speaks of "consciousness," but I wonder what a genealogy of modernism might look like that would focus less on introspection and interiority than the import of

¹⁴⁶ A version of "Modern Fiction" was originally published in 1919 under the title "Modern Novels." It was extensively revised for republication in 1925 under its new title.

¹⁴⁷ In "Modern Novels" the passage reads: "The mind, exposed to the ordinary course of life, receives upon its surface a myriad impressions—trivial, fantastic, evanescent, or engraved with the sharpness of steel. From all sides they come, an incessant shower of innumerable atoms, composing in their sum what we might venture to call life itself; and to figure further as the semi-transparent envelope, or luminous halo, surrounding us from the beginning of consciousness to the end. It is not perhaps the chief task of the novelist to convey this incessantly varying spirit with whatever stress or sudden deviation it may display, and as little admixture of the alien and external as possible?" (33).

theories of matter and the body in modernist representations of subjectivity. Perhaps this is the beginning of one.

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